'A most significant collection, the timeliest of reminders of our common humanity and the irrepressible force of the written word.' Philippe Sands

Profits donated to Medical Aid for Palestinians

DAYBREAK IN GAZA

Stories of Palestinian Lives and Culture

Edited by **Mahmoud Muna** and **Matthew Teller**

With **Juliette Touma** and **Jayyab Abusafia**

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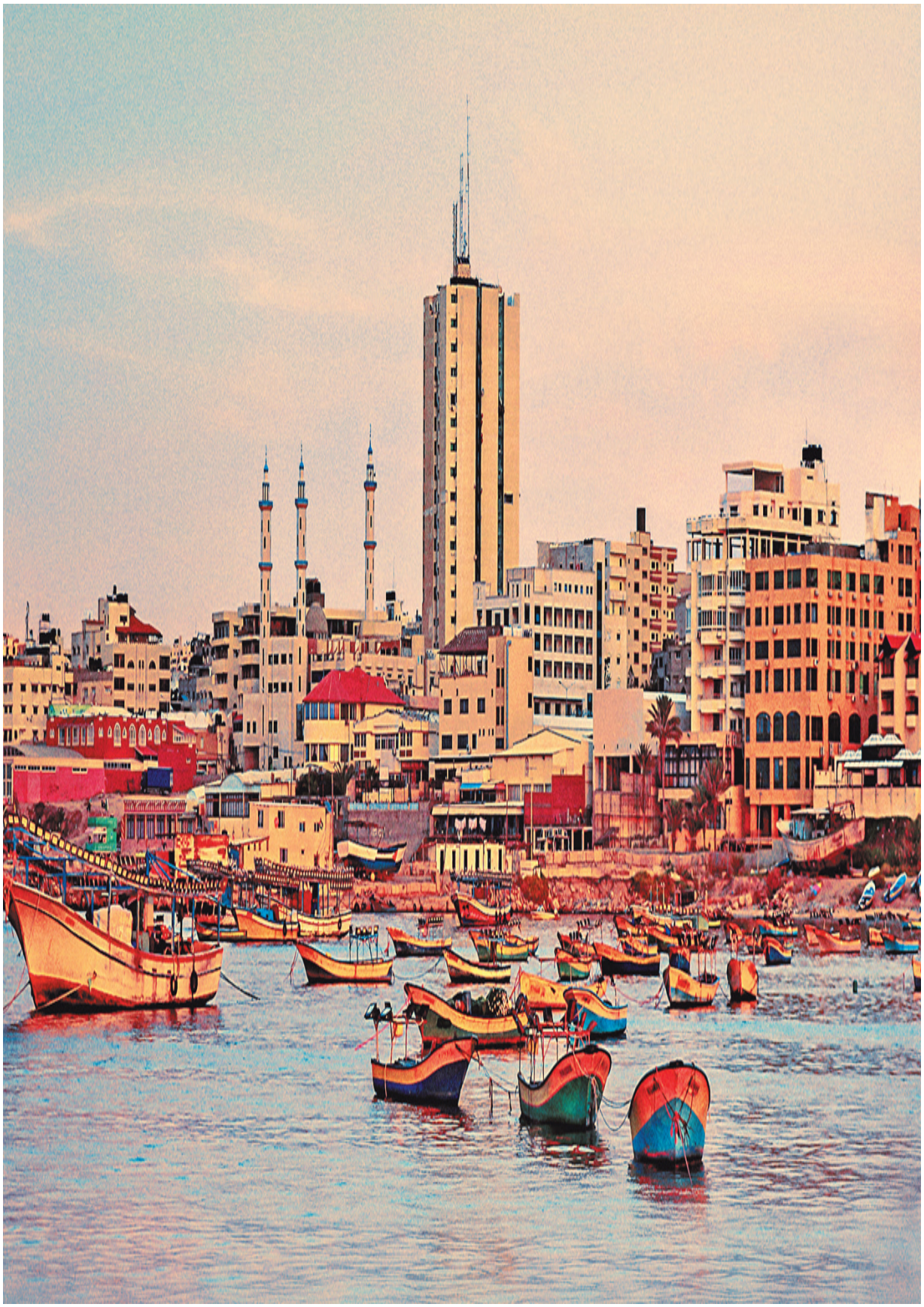

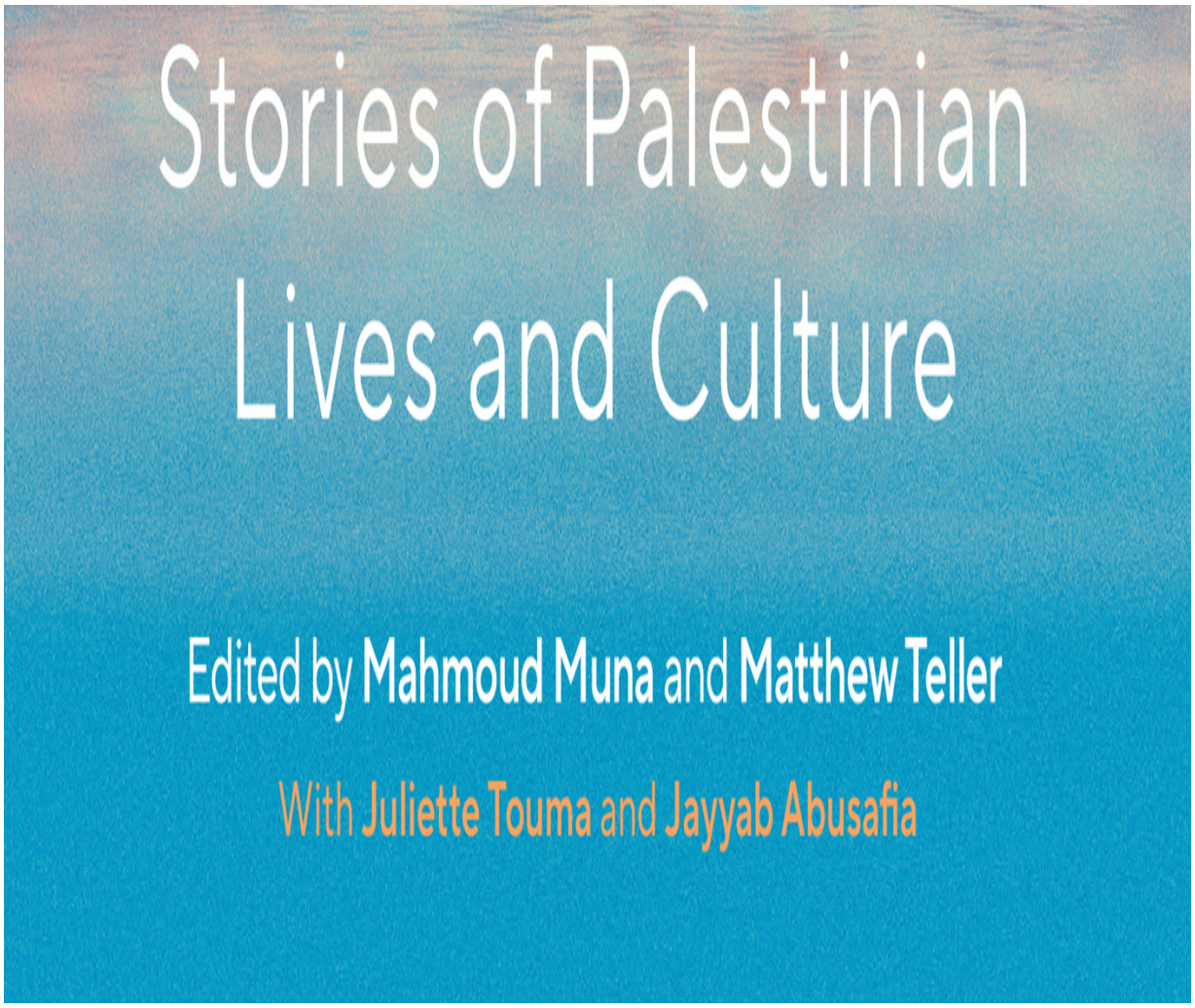
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With Juliette Touma and Jayyab Abusafia

DAYBREAK IN GAZA

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'A love letter to Gaza. A heartbreaking testament to the beauty and courage of Palestinian people in the face of extraordinary brutality.'
Isabella Hammad

'A most significant collection, the timeliest of reminders of our common humanity and the irrepressible force of the written word.'
Philippe Sands

'Essential reading … a roar of fury and a cry for compassion.'
Suad Amiry

'This astonishing book opened my eyes to the brutality that is being visited upon Gaza and to the humanity of those suffering it. Please read it.'
Brian Eno

'A profoundly moving collection. At once a lyrical overview of a rich cultural landscape and a devastating indictment of genocide and of culture's destruction.'
China Miéville

'Heartbreaking and inspiring ... a necessary, intelligent call to intellectual arms and proof that hope is still possible.'
Alberto Manguel

‘These lives have been devastated, but we can preserve their vital voices. *Daybreak in Gaza* must be shared with the world.’
Fatima Bhutto

DAYBREAK IN GAZA

Stories of Palestinian Lives & Culture

EDITED BY
Mahmoud Muna *and* Matthew Teller

WITH
Juliette Touma *and* Jayyab Abusafia

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Front cover image: Palestinian fishermen boats at Gaza seaport
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For justice, accountability
and the people of Gaza

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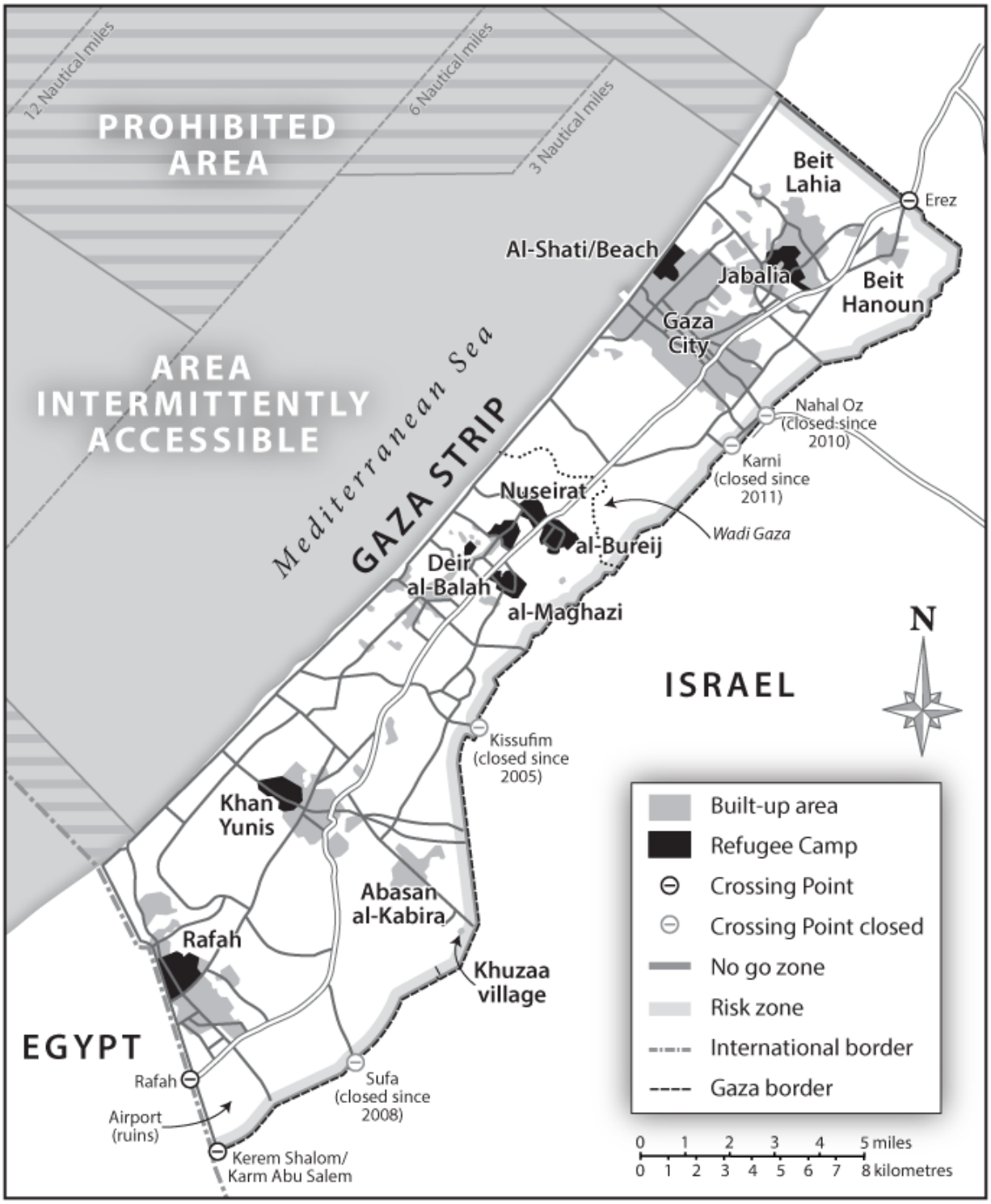

PROHIBITED AREA
12 Nautical miles
6 Nautical miles
3 Nautical miles
AREA INTERMITTENTLY ACCESSIBLE
Mediterranean Sea
GAZA STRIP
ISRAEL
EGYPT
Beit Lahia
Erez
Al-Shati/Beach
Jabalia
Beit Hanoun
Gaza City
Nahal Oz (closed since 2010)
Karni (closed since 2011)
Nuseirat
Wadi Gaza
al-Bureij
Deir al-Balah
al-Maghazi
Kissufim (closed since 2005)
Khan Yunis
Abasan al-Kabira
Rafah
Khuzaa village
Rafah
Airport (ruins)
Kerem Shalom/ Karm Abu Salem
Sufa (closed since 2008)
N
Built-up area
Refugee Camp
Crossing Point
Crossing Point closed
No go zone
Risk zone
International border
Gaza border
0 1 2 3 4 5 miles
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 kilometres

PREFACE

After Nuremberg, after the Khmer Rouge, after Rwanda and Srebrenica and Darfur and Sinjar, the world kept saying ‘never again’. Yet, in Gaza, in 2024, we are facing the burning of books and bodies. How should we, in homes of safety, respond to genocide and to the complicity of our own governments? What, specifically, is the role of writers, artists and others engaged in the creative industries? There are no easy answers. Futility stares us down on every side. Nevertheless, showing solidarity with victims and survivors is one response, and can take many forms.

Solidarity prompted us – Mahmoud Muna, bookseller and cultural activist in Jerusalem, and Matthew Teller, UK-based journalist and author of *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem*, supported by UNRWA’s communications director Juliette Touma and, later, Gazan journalist Jayyab Abusafia – to launch this project. At a time when Palestinian people everywhere are in trauma and experiencing unimaginable personal horror, it was a privilege to produce a book that we hope will be of lasting value in preserving Gaza’s culture and retelling Gaza’s stories for new audiences.

Daybreak in Gaza gathers together almost a hundred accounts of Gazan lives and stories from before and during Israel’s ongoing bombardments. It is an attempt to amplify marginalised voices and illuminate hidden histories to evoke the spirit of a place under attack through the lives of its people. We contacted hundreds of people: not just Gaza’s poets and writers, but also its doctors and shopkeepers, its farmers and office workers. At a time of profound anguish, bereavement and loss, we found that Gazans – even those surviving starvation and bombardment inside Gaza – were not only willing to talk, but often desperate to do so. Stories poured out. In an unimaginable context of death and wholesale destruction, Gazans wanted urgently to be heard, to record and preserve whatever once counted as

normal and valuable and meaningful. Many were keeping war diaries already, unpublished or posted piecemeal on social media. Others spoke to us at length, or recorded voice messages for us to transcribe.

Together, they paint a picture that eviscerates media stereotypes of Gaza as a valueless slum. They demonstrate the depth and richness of Gaza society simply by asserting, prosaically, that crops are harvested in Gaza's fields, that young lovers in Gaza shop for jewellery and phones, that families picnic on Gaza's beaches, that priests baptise Gazan babies, that students catalogue Gaza's archaeological sites, that elders preserve stories and ephemera from Gaza's past as the foundation of Gazan communities today.

We completed this book in three months, from March to May 2024. Editors in London, Paris, Amman, Cairo, Jerusalem and, when communications allowed, Gaza gathered, transcribed and translated testimonies. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face. Others were done by stitching together text messages and voice notes, often received in the small hours of the morning with bombing audible behind speakers' voices. It is a snapshot of a single moment. In many cases, we don't know what has happened to our Gaza contributors since they spoke to us. We can only hope they have survived.

Proceeds from this book will support the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians.

Mahmoud Muna and Matthew Teller
July 2024

Ahmed Mortaja

BREAKING NEWS

Hello. Ahmed from Gaza here.

I'm worried that my name might become breaking news. Like when they say: 'So-and-so number of bodies have been recovered during a violent bombardment of different areas.' Then I'll become a plain number, added to the counter which has not stopped counting to this moment. I wouldn't like it for my name and my family's name to become numbers, odd or even.

I have many dreams – to travel to a wider world, outside Gaza, so I can truly believe the scenes, images and experiences that I see online.

I am talking to you even though I don't have any information about what's happening outside. Outside my home, I mean – the one we returned to after our neighbourhood was bombed a few days ago. There is no means of communication with anyone. The sound of bombardment hasn't stopped, and neither have the flares illuminating the area, warning of who knows what.

What I fear most is that everything will become normal: the normal is that the house gets bombed, and the abnormal is that there was no advance warning. The normal is that the child dies, and the abnormal is that he died screaming … And many other things, that this note is too small for.

I am Ahmed. My friends call me Asem or Asoumi. I don't have much news about my friends. I check on them through short videos, whenever I get the chance to be online. I check all the faces to make sure that my friends are not among them – but at the same time I realise that all those in the pictures and videos are in fact my friends … I end up crying.

I am Ahmed, and I've hated Arabic and grammar classes since I was little. I hate questions about finding the difference between two things. I hate answers, and I love questions. A question two days ago made me stop and think: What's the difference between escalation and war? I wondered why it matters if the result is the same: a mother crying and a screaming child (if there is a chance to cry and scream).

I am Ahmed, and I am afraid that I will die and become a number, and that everything will be gone before I complete what I have to write.

Ahmed Mortaja was born in Gaza in 1996. He wrote this diary piece, sourced from the website Passages Through Genocide*, in the early hours of 13 October 2023. An airstrike destroyed his home on 28 October, but he came out from under the rubble and continued writing.*

Heba Almaqadma

IF ONLY I HAD KNOWN

It was the evening of 10 October 2023. My family and I were sitting in our home in the al-Tawam neighbourhood in the north of Gaza. That night, we were trying to find peace of mind, worried about what the future had in store for us.

All of a sudden, bombs started raining from the sky. The windows of our home all shattered as glass, rocks and concrete went flying everywhere. We lost electricity as smoke and debris filled our home, reducing visibility to zero. We ran to the basement, fearing that the next bomb was for us.

That's when I realised our lives would never be the same again. As we sat in the basement, we looked at each other in silence. My whole family was trembling in fear. Little did we know, a genocide was awaiting us.

If only I had known to plan for a genocide, I would have cherished those last moments at home, my last night in a bed, my last morning coffee, my last kibbe dipped in hummus, my last day at work, my last laugh, my last birthday celebration, my last everything. If only I had known, I would have packed up a few of those memories with me.

But I didn't have the chance to do that, because we decided to evacuate immediately. That's one of the horrible things we have to do all the time – try to guess the least bad option among terrible options.

We decided to evacuate. My family of ten squeezed into our car, kids on top of adults. Within a few seconds, there was another massive explosion in front of us. The next thing I remember, blood was everywhere in the car. I

grabbed my nine-year-old brother, Adam, who is disabled, and I held him tightly.

I still remember the sound of my mum's voice at that moment. 'Adam is dead, Heba, I can't feel him!' she said. I looked at Adam, and told her that he was OK, that he was just in shock. We were all shocked. Somehow, we survived.

I held Adam as we got out of the car and started running back home. My dad was in front of me, the rest of my family was behind me. Who was I supposed to look after? Adam was too scared to be left alone even for a few seconds, and so I couldn't leave him. I could feel my hands going numb from holding him so tight. 'Dad,' I said. 'Help me, I can't hold Adam any more.'

My dad shouted: 'My finger is cut, Heba, I can't!' My dad's hand had been sliced open and blood was gushing everywhere.

Debris littered the streets, almost looking like an earthquake. But it was not an earthquake. It was a bomb sent to kill us. Maybe it was a dumb bomb, an imprecise bomb, that can land thirty metres or more from its target. Half the bombs Israel sends to kill us are dumb bombs. Israel exports sophisticated military technology to the world but, when it comes to us Palestinians in Gaza, the latest technology is not needed, since Israel's 'focus is on [creating] damage, not on precision.' That's what an Israeli Army spokesperson said on 10 October 2023 – the same day Israel bombed our home.

We rushed to our neighbour's house, hoping and praying they were home. Their son is a nurse; he treated my dad while we waited for an ambulance. Hours passed. We later found out that two of the ambulances that tried to reach us were bombed. Eventually, an ambulance arrived, thank God.

We sheltered at al-Shifa hospital while my family was being treated. My one-year-old niece Sarah needed stitches in her head and hand. She was in so much shock she couldn't even cry. My brother Mohammed had a splint in his head and needed surgery, which we were eventually able to get for him seventy-six days later. My dad's hand was so badly wounded the

doctors thought they might have to amputate. But, thank God, we cared for it and cleaned it every day, and he still has his hand.

We took refuge in al-Shifa hospital for a month. We barely had anywhere to sleep and we did not have access to clean water. Every day, hundreds of people would arrive at the hospital, some severely injured, some already dead. The agony of the families of the victims was too much to bear. The only thing I remember from al-Shifa is the never-ending screams of pain that filled the hallways of the hospital.

Then we were forced to move to the south, to Khan Yunis. We made the dangerous journey on foot. For the first time, I felt what my grandparents must have felt during the Nakba in 1948. I understood why they kept the keys to their homes. Those keys were filled with memories.

We stayed in Khan Yunis for twenty-four days, where we had almost nothing. We had no gas for cooking, no electricity, no means of transportation and no safe place to shelter in. We were among the lucky ones just to be able to take a shower. Then we were ordered by the Israeli military to leave. We moved again, this time to Rafah.

As I walk through the streets of Rafah today, all I see is fear. The fear of life and the fear of death. We are living in fear every moment of the day. We now also fear that we will never have our lives back.

In this war, who am I? To the world, it seems I am just a number, a person who is counted on a list of people displaced, people injured or people hungry and thirsty. And if the next bomb is for me, I will be another number to add to the number of people killed in the genocide – and then I will be forgotten.

Heba Almaqadma is a writer, English/Arabic translator and student of pharmacy at Al-Azhar University in Gaza. She describes herself as a beacon for the silenced voices of the unjustly treated, finding solace and inspiration within the pages of literature. She contributed this memoir to Palestine Nexus *in March 2024.*

Mohammed Omer

RAFAH TODAY

27 OCTOBER 2003

World without hearts. The majority have lost their feelings, lost the meaning of humanity… no values, no principles. My brother – killed in cold blood [on 18 October 2003], amid international silence. He was in the house when Israeli bulldozers and tanks attacked the area and invaded our neighbours' houses. The street was completely destroyed and there were only two choices: either to be bulldozed with the house and killed under the rubble, or to get out of the house and be killed in the shelling and sniping that doesn't differentiate between children, women or the elderly. All are targeted.

My brother Hussam, seventeen years old, was a secondary school student. He was one of those who chose not to die under the rubble of the house, so he went out trying to find shelter or a safe area where he could go. As he left the house he was killed instantly by seven evil bullets, from those countries that support the Israeli Army against children. All seven were American bullets, the doctors told me in the hospital.

As they shot Hussam with seven American bullets, a neighbour, Wedad al-Ajrami, thirty-three, tried to help him and get him to the hospital, but they killed her too. Wedad's husband tried to help her, but he was injured in his neck and body, and is now in a serious condition at the hospital. Wedad's son tried to help his mother, but they shot him as well, and he is also in hospital now. Wedad's brother-in-law tried to help, but he, too, was shot by Israeli soldiers. Five people fell to the ground, one after the other. The blood of all five mingled on the ground. One of the injured was crying

for help, but no one could hear because of the noise of shelling from F16 fighter jets and Apache attack helicopters. And when the ambulance driver arrived, they tried to shoot him, too. It was only after a long wait for safety that he was able to collect the bodies of my brother and Wedad, as well as the three wounded.

The moments when my mother got the news of my brother's murder can't be described. They were the worst in my whole life. I was speaking to my brother a few hours ago, and now his face is cold in the hospital's refrigerator. I tried to talk to him, but he couldn't answer. I touched his face and understood the hateful thing that had happened.

Wedad – what did she do to be killed by Israeli bullets? She has left behind four children, one just a baby. My brother was killed with seven bullets – why? Those trees that were destroyed, those houses – why?

23 DECEMBER 2003

Rafah Refugee Camp is being shelled by Israeli Apaches. Tanks and bulldozers left eight people killed and over forty-five injured, in addition to demolishing a huge number of houses. Many people were lost in that attack, which is still ongoing. Those killed today were Weam Rezk Muss, 25; Ala Ata Bahloul, 23; Rami Azmi Hasaneen, 22; Khalil Al-Kasas, 55; Ali al-Najra, 22; Aied Al-Najar, 34; Ahmed al-Najr, 32; and Khamis Al-Raie, 21.

And still, the situation is very bad. The Apaches have not left the Rafah sky. They are shelling every place and every area. Thousands of homeless families lost their tents in the last few days because of the winter wind. Now, families that are newly homeless will also have to live in tents on the street in the cold.

26 DECEMBER 2003

The number of homes that have been demolished is still unclear. The UNRWA clinic was also partially destroyed. This time, women and children were not injured by bullets, but by dogs: the Israeli soldiers let their predator dogs loose to attack people.

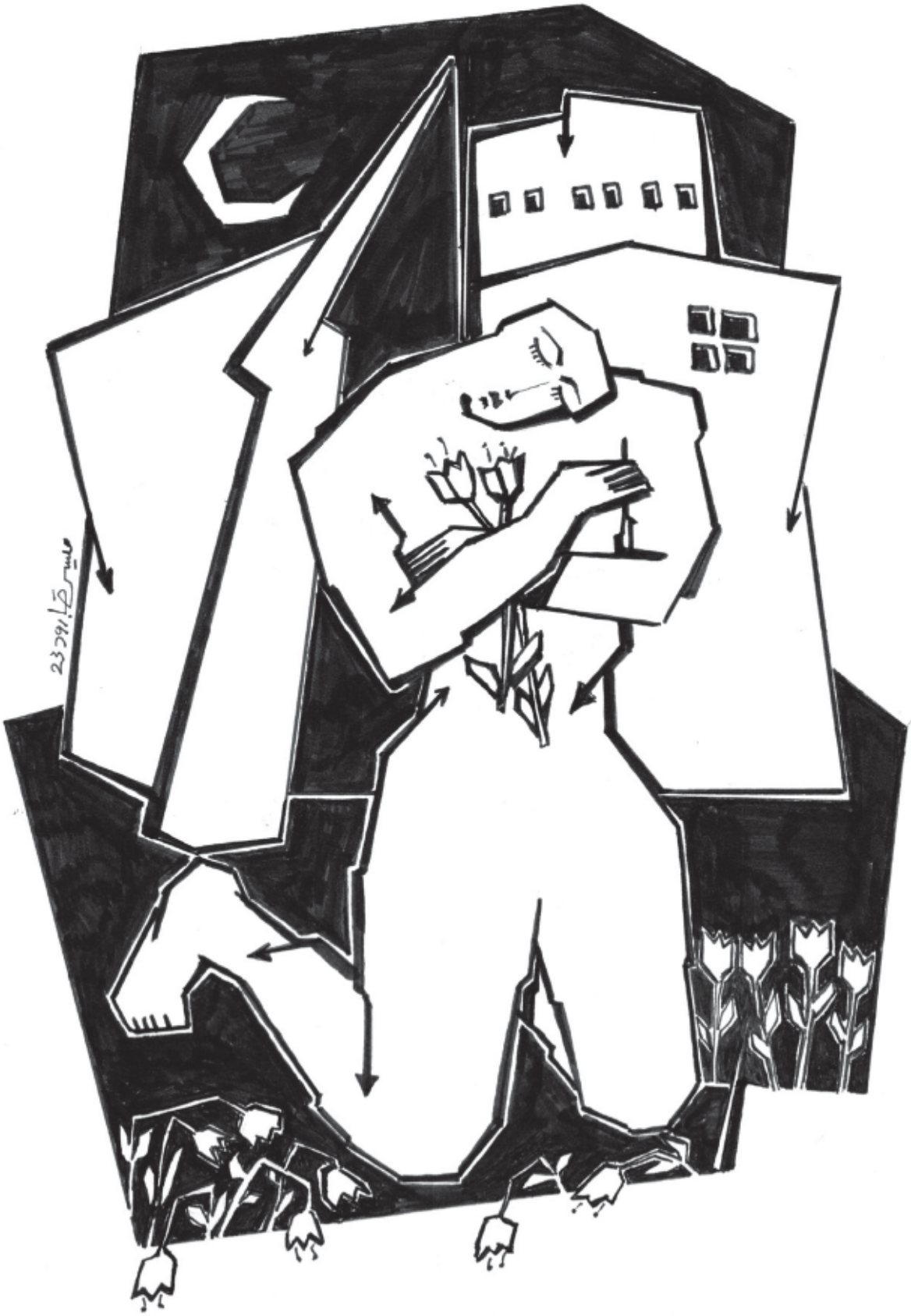
This is our life, daily attacks with outrageous killing in all sorts of ways. We write and no one reads; we scream and no one hears; we are torn apart and no one sees our torn bodies; we are killed and no one feels for us. That's why we have to continue writing and screaming. Screaming at a world that wants us to die. We are hungry while they are replete; we identify our martyrs while they relax in luxury. And the only thing they want to hear from us is, 'Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir.'

These are edited excerpts from reports posted at RafahToday.org in 2003 by journalist Mohammed Omer. He was nineteen at the time. Born in Rafah in 1984, Omer worked as a child to support his family while his father was imprisoned in Israel. He went on to write for the New York Times *and the* New Statesman *among others, and was awarded the 2007 Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism. He returned to Gaza from postgraduate study to raise his family.*

Maisara Baroud

I’M STILL ALIVE

I’m Still Alive #3.



I’m Still Alive #2.

Artist Maisara Baroud was born in Gaza in 1976. He has exhibited in group and solo shows nationally and internationally and taught fine arts at al-Aqsa University in Gaza. He is now displaced to Rafah, from where he continues to post a new artwork to social media every day. ‘Drawing has become the special way to help me overcome death,’ he says.

Noor Swirki

DOUBLY VICTIMISED

I’m thirty-five years old, married and a mother of two children.

My daily routine was amazing. I worked as a project officer at one of the local institutions here. I started my day walking beside the sea on the Corniche. After work I would go to the gym, then spend the evening with my children and friends. We had visits, we had outdoor activities – we had too many things to do, in fact. We had the sea, we had a great beach, we had places to go. I miss this life.

[Everything now is] turned upside down. I’m waiting for my destiny. I’m living my time minute by minute, because we don’t have safety. We can’t plan for the next step. We have no idea what will happen, if we will stay alive or not, or our loved ones will stay alive or not. So there is no daily routine.

I’m currently displaced for the second time. I moved from Gaza to Khan Yunis, and then from Khan Yunis to Rafah, to a place called al-Mawasi. We don’t have any safety, we don’t have any shops for food. We are looking for food, looking for water, looking for electricity, for communication with the other side of the world. It’s a miserable life.

Being a displaced woman is a tragedy. You don’t have your own privacy. You don’t have your own health routine. You don’t have your own pads, because we have a shortage of pads for our cycle, and we don’t have access to hygiene. We wear headscarves all the time, even when we are sleeping. We don’t have any space. We are obligated to take care of the family members. We have this double responsibility for them, for the

children, even for our elderly family members – our husbands, our sisters, our brothers and all the family members. To be a woman in this world, you are doubly victimised – from the occupation, from the current situation, from the community. Even the relief aid that we are receiving doesn't take into consideration our needs as women. The response to our demands related to hygiene is weak. We are suffering from all of these multiple issues.

I miss my home. I miss my privacy. I miss my bed, my clothes. I'm wearing men's clothes because there are no women's clothes that fit me in the market. I feel like a man while I'm wearing these clothes, but I don't have any other choice. I want to be back in my home and to sleep safely.

Noor Swirki spoke to Vinícius Assis for Hammer and Hope *in December 2023 and January 2024.*

Mohammed Aghaalkurdi

A WAR DIARY

9 OCTOBER 2023

It’s daytime, but I haven’t seen any sunlight since early morning. I can’t tell whether it is because of clouds or dust from the heavy bombardment. Now, through my window, I see dark smoke rising from northern Gaza. Unbelievably, my building was one of the only ones to survive the deadly attack on my neighbourhood last night. The bombardment was the heaviest, and we couldn’t reassure our nephews and nieces: helpless hugs and fake grins didn’t work this time. We were so scared and tired. Smoke filled our lungs while debris was falling. But I remember a moment when we all smiled – when we heard it raining. A hand descending from the skies.

We do not sleep much. Food and other essentials have started to run out. We lack phone signal and electricity most of the day, and barely speak and interact with each other. We grieve the loss of so many, silently.

Many of my friends have shared a last word on their pages, as something to be remembered by in case they die next. I don’t think I am ready to read or write any last words. I refuse to imagine death.

9 FEBRUARY 2024

It’s a sunny day, and if there was no war I would have spent it swimming in the open sea. As I drive down to Rafah on the coast road, I see people and fishermen gathering by the shore, while the clear water invites those who have no water at home to take a dip and wash. People accept the kind

invitation of the sea. I see dozens wading into the water with their shower gel and their joy.

I stop to admire the scene and to learn resilience from it. People's laughter makes me smile. Suddenly, I hear engines rising. As I look across the water, I see two gunboats racing towards the beach. As they approach the fishing boats, they open fire. Everyone is terrified and tries to get away, while the gunboats continue to fire randomly. Our innocent act of resilience – fishing and keeping clean – represented no threat, but those piloting these boats want us to remember that they control not only the land and air, but also what seems to be the open sea.

26 FEBRUARY 2024

We have been trying so hard to evacuate my niece Mayar, as she needs specialist medical care and we cannot protect her. Two days ago, she was at last referred outside Gaza, luckily with her mother, Eman, and her brother and sister, Hamoud and Malak. They left to Egypt and then to the cancer centre in Amman. But sadly, her father was not allowed to go. Mayar has been displaced, made homeless, denied medical care, forced to shelter in a tent in the cold and is now being separated from her father for no reason.

Today, I was able to get a signal and managed to call. My sister Eman said they have been overwhelmed by the welcome in Jordan; she cried when she told me of her embarrassment at being treated with such generosity as an expression of solidarity. She said she took the kids out and bought them each a bag of crisps. First they were surprised to see snacks again, after such a long time without – and then a bag each seemed to them like too much. Hamoud, who is nine, asked if they could share one bag and send the other two to their cousins in Gaza.

4 MARCH 2024

It’s kite-running season and children in Gaza have decided not to miss out, despite the suffering, insecurity and hunger they have had to endure. Colourful kites made of thin paper by delicate hands compete with heavy warplanes guided by monsters – yet sometimes the kites outnumber the machines in the sky and win. The message the children send can be very powerful, particularly when they choose the colours of the Palestinian flag – and flying a kite is in itself an act of resistance, breaking the air siege and reclaiming the Palestinian skies, succeeding where politicians and militants have failed.

After troops withdrew from the blocks behind where I shelter, a friend went to check on his home. But he found a group of thieves armed with knives occupying the building. They drove him away. Sadly, this is not the first time I hear such a story. Robbery has become common and people have been attacked while trying to intervene or reclaim their property. This offensive has exposed the worst in people: hunger has pushed them to steal aid from trucks and sell it at inflated prices in the market, and now to justify horrible actions and violence in the name of need.

30 MARCH 2024

My family has finally decided to evacuate Gaza. It was not an easy decision to make, as it goes against our beliefs and ethics. But this war has destroyed everything we built and called home. I will be the only member to stay, and will have to endure alone.

You either pay or die, that’s what our lives have become. US$56,650 was the number we had to pay in order to add six adults and eight kids to the departure list. We have sold our assets – cars, gold – cheaply in order to secure the cash. Safety is expensive and yet still not guaranteed until names are called. I know of people who paid to be put on the list, only to have death come to them sooner than departure.

And many friends who left have reported feeling stuck and worthless. They can’t move a single step forward with their lives. They’re pinned to

their chairs, observing the massacres from a distance – and that turns out to be harder than experiencing it first-hand. Some already regret leaving Gaza and want to return, so that at least their death might mean something. It's the same for us, people of northern Gaza who were forced to flee south: despite the horrific starvation and genocide up there, we sometimes ask why we ever left our homes.

8 APRIL 2024

I consider myself someone who can sustain a level of wellbeing during hardship, but this current escalation has undermined my ability to maintain my inner peace and mindfulness. I feel so anxious and irritated. I did not sleep well last night. Tank shelling and air raids continued without pause over the neighbourhood near my shelter. The noise of armoured vehicles and the intensity of firing from the quadcopters upset me, and I was gripped by the fear of waking up to find myself besieged.

My five-year-old nephew, darling Omar, made us laugh today. He regards this as a war against children. We overheard him telling his mother: 'At least grown-ups can find coffee in the market. Children like me can't find any snacks or lollipops. Now do you understand why this war is against us, not you?'

Mohammed Aghaalkurdi was born in 1993 in Gaza City where he qualified as a doctor. He works in Gaza for Medical Aid for Palestinians, including as part of a multidisciplinary team on limb reconstruction for victims of gunshot and shrapnel wounds and other injuries, and is supporting MAP's rehabilitation of Nasser Hospital following Israeli attacks. He contributed these extracts in May 2024.

Hemmed in against the seashore by the emptinesses of the Sinai and Naqab deserts, and straddling the highway that joins Mesopotamia and the Syrian littoral to the Nile, Gaza's wedge of fertility has been a frontier zone for all of recorded history. It's a humid, sandy place, where the shaded oasis of Wadi Gaza – wadi is an Arabic word meaning seasonal watercourse – marks a stop-off point for birds on their intercontinental migrations and animals seeking new feeding grounds, as much as for human armies waging war north into the Levant or south into Egypt.

Five thousand years ago, or a little more – long before the Pyramids – Egyptian travellers arrived here and built houses of clay on the wadi banks, where now the outskirts of Gaza City lie. They probably came thanks to the expansionist policies of Narmer, perhaps the first ruler of a unified Egypt, whose chosen hieroglyph was a species of stinging electric catfish still found in the Nile today. (He might have been trying to outdo previous monarchs who had chosen representations as scorpions and bulls.) Subjects of the Catfish King lived in what would become Gaza for several generations, hunting to survive, discarding blades of flint and crafted pendants before departing, perhaps sorrowfully, as Egypt's political fortunes waned.

Centuries passed. Sometime around 2650 BCE the same spot was re-settled, this time by the region's local Canaanite population. Their tentative foundation grew to become what archaeologists have called a royal city, with a 'high level of organisation, administrative and military structures'. This seaside city-state, by then elevated atop a mound above the wadi, flourished for three hundred years, easily repelling Egyptian attacks from behind its eight-metre-thick walls. Its people were farmers, shepherds and fishers, growing olives and grapes as well as the staples of wheat and barley.

But the tide turned for them, too. They left, and memories faded, and when sand drifted in through doors and windows there was nobody to sweep it out again. Four thousand years and a few centuries rolled by, until building work began in 1998 for a housing development at what people knew as Tell es-Sakan, the Hill of Ashes, on the edge of Gaza City. As bulldozers ate into the sandy hill where families liked to picnic at the weekend, where children would play and men on noisy motorbikes pulled wheelies, onlookers noticed bits of pottery emerging from the dirt. They intervened, work was stopped, and over the next two years a team led by Palestinian archaeologist Moain Sadeq and his French colleague Pierre de Miroschedji began to expose the history of the hill for the first time, piecing together Gaza's unexpected links to the Catfish King of antiquity.

The Intifada which began in 2000 cut their work short. Developers crept back, bulldozing part of the hill to create space for Gaza's growing, captive population and people left unhoused by repeated Israeli bombardments. Expansion of nearby university buildings in 2009 and 2012 made further inroads. Finally, in 2017, despite an outcry from locals and international archaeologists alike, Gaza's government steamrollered the whole site flat for development. The Hill of Ashes, once so grand, is now no more than an entry in academic bibliographies, its ancient names forgotten and the evidence of its lives lost for ever.

Gaza's history in the period following the abandonment of the Hill of Ashes in about 2350 BCE is hazy, though we know the centre of population shifted a few hundred metres south to a mound now known as Tell el-Ajjul ('Calves' Hill'). This has been tentatively identified with Sharuhen, the hideout of what was once thought to have been the Hyksos people following their ejection from Egypt – though scholars now understand the Hyksos to have been less a nation than a monarchical dynasty that ruled in the decades either side of 1600 BCE from a power-base in the Nile Delta. The Hyksos were probably Canaanite – or at least Levantine – in origin and, momentously, may have introduced the horse to Egypt, along with chariots, composite bows, full-body armour and innovations in music, textiles and viticulture. They dealt in all sorts of luxury commodities including turquoise, gold and lapis lazuli, but the oligarchs of Upper Egypt seem to have found their foreign

ways intolerable. In 1560 BCE or thereabouts, pharaonic armies swept north, attacking and, under the mighty Ahmose I, expelling the Hyksos from the Delta.

But even that wasn't an end of it. Ahmose pursued the Hyksos beyond the desert to Sharuhen – wherever it was – besieging the city for three years before finally breaking in, destroying it and its inhabitants.

Is Tell el-Ajjul Sharuhen? Or is one of the other sites from this period that cluster around Wadi Gaza? We don't know. But we do know that Tell el-Ajjul had been a place of wealth and connections since long before the Hyksos, importing goods from Cyprus and Upper Egypt and producing exquisite jewellery: the British Museum displays a hoard of dazzling gold bracelets, earrings, beads and pendants discovered at Tell el-Ajjul in 1933 and, perhaps inevitably, removed to London.

In the centuries following the Hyksos, Gaza turns up often in the chronicles of ancient Egypt and Assyria, sometimes as 'Azzati', sometimes 'Hazzatu', invariably identified as a key frontier city on routes linking Egypt and Syria.

But everything changed when the Sea Peoples arrived.

The trouble is, nobody is quite sure who the Sea Peoples were – or even if they existed at all. Apparently a loose confederation of ethnicities and identities from around the Aegean and Mediterranean islands, they seem, from fragmentary evidence in pharaonic inscriptions, to have attacked the Egyptian and Levantine coast in the approximate period 1200 BCE to 1000 BCE. The Sherden (from Sardinia), the Lukka (from Lycia), the Shekelesh (from Sicily), and more – there were lots of them; but, for our story, the sea people who matter are the Peleset, the Pwrsty or the Pulasati, known to us as the Philistines.

They changed Gaza for ever.

Katherine Pangonis

WRITTEN IN FABRIC: NIVEEN MOSLEH, IBRAHIM MUHTADI AND MARY KAWAR ON EMBROIDERY

The history of Gaza is written in fabric, in dark silks banded with colour, fine cotton gauzes and heavy linens dyed deepest indigo and embroidered with cypress trees. Gaza's textiles hold a record of individual creativity and collective identity dating back centuries. More than this, in the samples of tatreez – traditional Palestinian embroidery – we find the legacy of women, so often written out of history, who have stitched the proof of their talent and their resistance into cloth.

The origins of this art form can be traced back three thousand years. 'Tatreez is a messenger for all Palestinian people. It is our history, our present and our future. It promotes our culture and tells our story [inside and] outside Palestine. There is a strong link between this art and our identity,' says the Gaza-based designer and textile historian Ibrahim Muhtadi. The image of a woman wearing tatreez has become symbolic of the connection between Palestinians and Palestine. It evokes memories of communities living simply on the land, dyeing their fabrics with bright carmine from cochineal insects and rich blues from indigo plants, embroidering their identity onto their clothing. Silks and linens, prized since antiquity, were produced by skilled artisans, both female and male, in three stages: weaving the cloth on traditional treadle looms, dyeing it and finally embroidering it.

Gaza's affinity for weaving persisted through conquest and reconquest. A Latin *Glossarium* from 1678 by French philologist Charles du Fresne du Cange suggested that *gazzatum* – meaning a finely woven fabric of linen or

silk threads, called *gaze* in French and gauze in English – was derived from the place name of Gaza, from where it was thought to have originated. This may be the earliest such reference, though an older derivation is certainly believable. Different places in Palestine often had their own products named after the locality. A special type of knotted binding stitch favoured in Gaza is still known in Arabic as *manjal ghazzawi* – 'Gazan sickle stitch'.

From the mid-nineteenth century, most textiles in Gaza were woven from cotton, linen and silk imported from Egypt or Syria. However, weaving also used local yarns, with Palestinian cotton becoming an important export to Europe. Gauze was also widely made, for head coverings as well as medical purposes.

By the twentieth century, Gaza and neighbouring Majdal were the largest weaving centres in Palestine, hosting hundreds of treadle looms. But the Nakba saw Majdal depopulated and erased by what is now the Israeli city of Ashkelon, its weaving facilities abandoned in the hurried escape. Many of its artisans found safety in Gaza's refugee camps, where they set up new looms. Their Majdalawi fabric lives on, incorporating black and indigo cotton threads banded by strips of turquoise and fuchsia representing heaven and hell.

The most widely used colour for fabric dyeing in Gaza was blue, derived from indigo. It was common for customers to take undyed cloth to the dyers, who would soak it to increase the intensity of the hue. Ethnographer Shelagh Weir has noted that light blue was cheaper: it required less work. The darker the shade, the richer the wearer. Next most important was red, achieved using pigments from madder plants, kermes insects and cochineal. Vivid pinks became emblematic of Gazan costume.

Palestinian embroidery is known for its richness of cross-stitch. Embroiderers arrange intricate motifs on the chest panel, sleeves and skirt of a thobe, the traditional long-sleeved, ankle-length dress. Many illustrate Palestine's natural environment – cypress or orange blossoms – while some have cultural roots, such as the eight-pointed star, and others are everyday objects: an amulet or even chicken's feet. There are hundreds of combinations. In Gaza a thobe may be embroidered with an intricate chest

panel known as a ‘Gaza necklace’ that functions like costume jewellery, stitched in bright colours around the neckline. Art historian Rachel Dedman has written that these ‘necklaces’ are held to have totemic, even protective qualities. Variations in pattern and colour indicate the wearer’s social and marital status, including stylised motifs of heaven and hell.

Mary Kawar, director of Amman’s Tiraz Centre – showcase for the uniquely comprehensive textile collection of her mother, Widad, born in Tulkarem in 1931 – emphasises how tatreez demonstrates the sophistication of pre-Nakba Palestine: ‘If you look at all these dresses, the richness, the skills, the innovation, the creativity and the trade and the economy involved in creating them, this was a society that was stable, that had economic means and a role for women. Women had their dowry stitched in coins on their headdresses, which no one could take, at a time when European women could not open a bank account. This reveals a narrative completely [counter] to what is said of Palestinians. You cannot have this embroidery heritage without a society that was thriving. You cannot be innovative and creative and have all this taste and skill if you [live hand to mouth]. Tatreez is not about the result, it’s about the process. It proves women had time to create luxury items.’ To this day, many families keep a pre-1948 thobe as a treasured heirloom, serving – as keys to abandoned homes also do – as proof of identity, evidence of linkage to a specific locality and symbol of a right to lost land.

Gazan women embroidering garments in 1967 (left) and 2022 (right).

As conditions deteriorated after 1948, access to materials and dyes tightened and trade in high-quality textiles dipped. But tatreez blossomed in new ways. Historically, textile art had been highly specific: individual villages would have their own styles. Gazan girls would grow up embroidering their wedding gown and the items of their trousseau, sewing the markers of their identity. Women from different parts of Palestine would have no need to ask after each other's origins, since the evidence would be encoded in their clothing. But the Nakba's upheavals loosened the practice of embroidering village-specific motifs, introducing 'camp dresses' that blended the styles of women from different regions who suddenly found themselves living side by side in refugee camps.

In 1950, UNRWA established the Sulafa embroidery project as a way for Gaza's refugee women to generate their own income. It has grown to become a non-profit enterprise selling jackets, cushion covers, bags and

phone cases worldwide via partner outlets. ‘The goal is to support vulnerable women and promote Palestinian heritage,’ says director Niveen Mosleh.

Niveen, originally from Beit Daras village near Majdal, destroyed in 1948, describes how her grandmother used to visit her family every week, preparing maftoul. ‘Then she would embroider. I would follow the movement of her fingers and how she transformed pieces of Majdalawi cloth into a beautiful dress.’

During the First Intifada (1987–93), tatreez shifted again. Women began to sew images of national pride. When Israel banned the Palestinian flag, embroiderers replaced traditional turquoises and fuchsias with the flag’s red, green, white and black. Flowers and birds gave way to maps of historic Palestine. ‘Women embroidered the names of cities and the walls of Jerusalem,’ says Niveen. ‘They stitched wedding [scenes], keffiyeh patterns and verses of poetry. Embroidery stood in solidarity with their steadfastness.’

Today, in the face of machine-made imports, hand embroidery has become a commodity. NGOs enable women to use tatreez as an income stream, though the model has its flaws: piece work can be unreliable, and profits inevitably accrue to distributors rather than creators. Nevertheless, Gaza’s reputation as a centre for textile production persists, centred on the striped fabrics used for school uniforms worn by children around Palestine. Sulafa works with more than four hundred women, each supporting a family of six or more, pairing younger trainees with skilled elders for coaching. ‘I love that tatreez empowers women. Its importance lies in the transmission of the immense wealth of this heritage to future generations,’ Niveen says.

Of the Majdalawi weaver families who arrived in Gaza after the Nakba, only a handful remained active before October 2023, some selling through the Nol Collective, a Ramallah-based design studio. Their handwoven rugs now serve as blankets for the displaced. Yet, says Niveen, tatreez helped Sulafa’s women ‘attain psychological stability. They display high levels of concentration and the ability to create despite pain and suffering.’

At the time of writing, with supply lines broken and outlets destroyed, many artisans have left. No weavers remain in Gaza. ‘Sulafa started in refugee tents in 1950. Now, in 2024, displaced women are still embroidering, back in tents once again,’ says Niveen. ‘We will return,’ adds Ibrahim Muhtadi, who for three years directed Sulafa’s embroidery output. ‘We keep these crafts alive so that we remember who we are. It’s resistance. We will keep producing, and we will keep rebuilding.’

Historian Katherine Pangonis is the author of Queens of Jerusalem *(2021) and* Twilight Cities *(2023). During two years in Lebanon she consulted for UNDP, volunteered with UNRWA and interviewed Palestinian refugees for the Fuller Project. It was in the refugee camps that she first became fascinated by the craft of tatreez. She contributed this essay in May 2024.*

Hani and Nabil Tarazi

GONE WITH THE WIND

Hani Tarazi: The Tarazis are one of the Christian families that are native to Gaza. My father used to say that the family name came from an ancestral grandmother who was a seamstress in Turkey – *'tarazi'* shares a root with the Arabic word for stitching or sewing – but we don't know for sure. We have documented the family tree back to 1755, starting with Daoud and his sons, Rizq, Abdullah and Atallah. From them, you get the three branches of the Tarazi: the Marazqa [from Rizq], the Abdullat and the Atallat. We are from the Marazqa, but there are Tarazi cousins from the other branches all mixed up together. Sometimes people from different branches intermarry. It's very confusing. Now you find Tarazis all over the world, in America, Australia, Europe, Jordan, Lebanon, everywhere. And some still in Gaza, of course.

My father Khader was wealthy, a self-made man. He was born in Gaza in about 1890, we think, and had seven siblings. As a young man he served in the Turkish police and then became a merchant, trading wheat and corn. Under the British, he became the Gaza agent for the oil companies Shell and Socony-Vacuum, which became Mobil. All the land from the edge of Tel Aviv right to the Egyptian border was his area, where he created supply networks and built fuel pumps.

He also exported oranges to Europe – this was at a time when Jaffa oranges were the top brand in the world. Early in the growing season he would visit the orange orchards around Jaffa and make an offer to certain farmers to buy their entire crop before the fruit was even ripe. He told us he

would walk through the orchard to see the condition of the trees, to judge how many oranges each tree would likely produce. He would calculate five metres between trees and five metres between each row to work out the number of trees. Then he would factor in export overheads, add a percentage for profit, and make his offer.

After a few years he bought a large piece of land in Gaza – fifty dunums [fifty thousand square metres, or twelve and a half acres] in the Sabra area, located between the Old City and the sea. Now it is built up, but back then it was all citrus trees. That was where he built our big family house. I was born in that house, with my five brothers and two sisters. We were well-to-do, and I had a marvellous childhood. My brother Antone – Nabil's father – was ten years older than me, and he built us a sort of chalet overlooking the sea. We would have sleepovers there with our friends. Early in the morning we would wait for the fishermen to come in in their boats, then go down to the shore, buy fish and cook and eat it fresh. At weekends, we would have qidreh, which is rice and meat in a clay pot, cooked in the oven of the neighbourhood bakery and brought to the chalet for everyone to eat, followed by slices of fresh watermelon. And we had parties at that chalet, dancing to American rock and roll. I was the only person with a motorbike at that time, so, when I revved that engine, everyone in Gaza knew Hani Tarazi was around! I was so spoiled. Gaza was a beautiful place.

Our house was destroyed in the recent airstrikes. Completely demolished. The Israelis have stolen our memories.

After graduating from Alexandria University, I came back to Gaza, but I was searching for a way out and, when an opportunity came up to work in Kuwait, I took it immediately. My father was upset and said he would pay me double whatever I was getting if I stayed. I told him even if he paid me the wealth of Harun al-Rashid [legendary caliph of Baghdad] I would not stay. I needed freedom. My mother was a very dominating personality. I had a girlfriend in Alexandria, and at that time to phone long-distance you had to call the operator first. My mother instructed the Gaza operators to inform her immediately if her son Hani ever tried to call Alexandria. I had to get

out of this. My father told me I would die of hunger in Kuwait. I replied that I was ready to die, that I wanted to die, by myself.

I did not regret leaving Gaza. It was hard: for three months in Kuwait I slept on the beach, rather than live in a house or take up all the invitations to stay. But I needed my independence. It was about dignity. I started to learn about the world. In 1964 I moved to Dubai, and I've been here ever since. But Gaza is where I was born, where I grew up. My lands are still there. We belong there, we belong to the sea, we belong to the earth. Gaza is in our blood.

Oh, the girlfriend in Alexandria? Gone with the wind.

Nabil Tarazi: I grew up in Ramallah, but Gaza was a regular outing for us at least once a month. All the uncles lived there. On a Sunday, which was my father's day off, we would drive – it took about an hour and a half – to spend time with the cousins, eat, roam the orchards, go to the beach. That big house has memories for all of us. It was where the family would gather for Easter and Christmas.

After the 1967 occupation, Israeli companies took over all the petrol suppliers: Shell no longer had a presence. Hani's brothers Suad and Suhail took over my grandfather's business, but he would still go to the office in Gaza City every day. He died in 1978.

My dad Antone, or Tony, left Gaza at sixteen to study in Jerusalem, and graduated second in the whole country. He went to the American University of Beirut, then specialised at a medical institute in Canada before returning in 1960. He was the first – and, for many years, the only – neurosurgeon in Palestine and Jordan. My mum, Rima, was one of the founders of the Edward Said Conservatory of Music in Gaza, and my cousins Shafiq and Wade Tarazi established Gaza College, a school that still exists today.

I've never lived in Gaza, but, when people ask where I come from, I say Jordan, my home, or Palestine, my identity, or Jerusalem, where I was born, or Ramallah, where I grew up – but at the bottom of it all, there is Gaza. I have lots of Gaza memories: the sea, cousins, the warmth of being with

family. Whenever I pass *fitna* [frangipani] flowers, their perfume, so strong, like jasmine, takes me right back to childhood in Gaza. I've overheard my son, who is eight and born in Amman, say to his friends that he is *ghazzawi* ['Gazan']. I don't know what this link is, exactly.

For us, Gaza is a symbol, a place that has stood for so many years against aggression, occupation and genocide. Today, at last, the world is seeing who the Palestinians are – we are human, ordinary human beings – symbolised in what is going on in Gaza every day. Gaza matters because it is the place where the rebirth of the Palestinian nation will probably begin.

Hani Tarazi was born in Gaza in 1937. He is now retired as an accountant. His nephew Nabil Tarazi, born in Jerusalem in 1965, gave up running a technology company in London to backpack around Asia and Australia in his early forties. On his return he created a sustainable tourism firm that has won global awards for its innovative management of a Jordanian desert eco-lodge. They were speaking from Hani's home in Dubai in May 2024.

Izzeldin Bukhari

THE BALLAD OF LULU AND AMINA

In 1948 my maternal grandparents Mohammed and Zahida Ali Hassan fled as refugees from Ramleh to Gaza, where they set up their new home and where my mum and all her siblings were born. Every year when I was young, my mum would take us to Gaza for our summer holidays. I remember we would get into a Mercedes taxi – the long ones with three doors on each side – outside our house in the middle of the Old City of Jerusalem, on Via Dolorosa, and it would take us directly to the doorstep of my grandmother's house in Gaza. You can't do that any more. I saw how Erez, the main entry checkpoint for Gaza, grew year by year up until 2000. That was the last time we were able to spend our summers in Gaza, because after that came the Second Intifada and the Israelis made travel impossible.

Since then the only time I've been to Gaza was when my sister Amina got married in 2008. Amina is so sweet and kind. She loves animals. We had a garden at home – my dad kept rabbits, pigeons, chicken, geese, ducks – and I remember Amina would adopt baby rabbits, even taking them to school with her. She knew how to communicate with them. It was like she had an extra heart for them.

Every year we would hang out with a neighbour of our grandma's in Gaza. He and Amina always got on well. After 2000 their relationship became virtual, because they couldn't meet any more, but they fell in love and decided to get married. It was a big dilemma in the family, not because of who he is – he's a great person – but we hesitated to send Amina to Gaza.

Everything was eventually agreed and, a few days before the wedding, we travelled together from Jerusalem – my father Abdul Aziz, my sisters Danya and Haya and my mum Hala. We got to Erez and an Israeli soldier, about eighteen years old, was very rude to my mother. I remember trying to stand up for her, which turned out to be a stupid mistake because the Israelis let all my family into Gaza except for me. They said my Israeli ID was fake and ordered me to go and bring my birth certificate to prove my identity. So everyone else went ahead to be with Amina, while I rushed back to Jerusalem, collected my birth certificate and came straight back to Erez the same day.

Then the Israelis told me that my birth certificate wasn't enough and I needed to bring my *laissez-passer* – a type of travel document issued to Jerusalemite Palestinians. They were playing games, but what could I do?

Next day, I returned to Erez with my *laissez-passer*, but then they told me that the only way I was going to get into Gaza was to renew my ID. It's not easy to go to the ministry and do all the paperwork to get a completely new Israeli ID card, but my sister's wedding was the following day, so I had to try. I went home and scheduled an appointment at the ministry for the next morning at 7am. I would pick up my new ID, go straight to Erez and hopefully still make it to the wedding.

I was making calls at home when our cat started to miaow at me. We had this beautiful white cat with blue eyes – or was it green eyes? I forget – called Julie, but everyone called her Lulu. Amina loved Lulu, and had had to leave her behind when she left to Gaza. I was thinking how much Amina was going to miss Lulu, and then I realised how great it would be to bring her to Gaza. Amina would love that. It would be such an incredible surprise for her. I was so excited about the idea. I was only twenty-three, remember. By then it was already night and I had to be up early for my appointment, so I started looking around the house for anything I could use to carry Lulu to Gaza.

An empty birdcage! Perfect.

Next day, I get up, go to the ministry, collect my ID, hurry back home, then somehow – honestly, it wasn't easy – get the cat into the birdcage. The

cage has a plastic base with thin metal bars fixed to it, and I can see it isn't very strong to hold Lulu, so I tape it up all the way round to try and hold it together, then I carry it down to the taxi.

At Erez, I get out and start walking towards the entrance holding this birdcage with Lulu inside – and it's exactly then that I think maybe this isn't a good idea. What am I doing? I've got Amina's cat in a birdcage and I'm trying to get through the Israeli checkpoint? What was I thinking? But I'm already there, and the wedding will be starting soon, and there's no time to go back home. I just hope the cat makes it.

I can see that the Israeli soldiers are watching me walk towards them, wondering what is this guy carrying. Alarm bells are ringing in my head, and I start thinking to myself, OK, don't be suspicious, just be as cute as possible here. This is just one nice guy and his pretty cat, nothing to be worried about. And I start talking to the cat in this coochy-coo voice, 'Hey, Lulululu, you're so beautiful, everything's great, look it's so much fun, we're going to Gaza!' The cat hates me.

I get to the soldiers, who are all armed, and I can see they've all got their finger on the trigger. They ask me what this is, and I just say, as lightly and as cutely as I can: 'It's a cat!'

'Why have you got a cat with you?'

'I want to take it to my sister.'

They don't believe me. They talk among themselves, and one of them gets on the walkie-talkie, and then I have the whole department at Erez come over to see Lulu, and they are firing questions at me. Who are you? Where are you from? Why do you want to go to Gaza? Why are you taking a cat? Who is your sister? Where is she? Who is she marrying? How does she know someone in Gaza? Why is she getting married there? Why do you have a cat? Does the cat live with you at home? What is the cat's name? Is it a pet? Why do you have pets?

Then the captain comes up to me, and says: 'If you take this cat into Gaza, it stays there. You can't get it back again.'

And I think, yeah, even the cat has the wrong ID for you, but I just say: 'Great! Perfect! That's my mission.'

He looks at me very seriously.

‘Did you put anything in the cat?’

I am very serious back to him, and say no.

He says again: ‘Did you feed the cat anything you’re not supposed to?’

I say: ‘Even if I tried, do you think she would let me?’

‘Is this cat dangerous in any way?’

I think all sorts of answers, but I say no.

They tell me to wait. Time passes, people come and go, I’m thinking about the wedding – and then I see that the Israelis have put Lulu on the belt of the baggage X-ray machine, still in her cage, and they’re sending her back and forth through the X-rays. Three times I see the cat go in, come out, then go back in again. By now she is really annoyed, and I’m worried she might break the cage, so the Israelis let me put a blanket over it to calm her down, but it doesn’t really work. Eventually they tell me to take the cat and move on.

At Erez, once you’re finished with Israeli control, you go to the Palestinian control, but it’s not close: the two buildings are a long way apart. So I get a taxi and I put Lulu’s cage in the boot of the car, and we start moving.

But Lulu’s had enough. She’s been in that cage at least three hours by this time and it’s July, the middle of summer, it’s so hot. As we’re driving, I can hear that she has got loose, and is hissing and freaking out.

We arrive, and the taxi driver asks me what I’m going to do now. He wants to get rid of me and go back to his normal customers. But the only way is to very slowly open the boot and immediately try to smother the cat with the blanket and get her back into the cage before she can escape – and that needs both of us.

It was, well, let me say difficult. Lulu made a lot of noise, and there was some scratching and biting involved, but between us we got her into the cage. Lulu is howling and screaming from inside the cage under the blanket, and the Hamas men at the checkpoint for entry to Gaza are firing all sorts of questions at me, and I have to go through the whole thing again.

What is this? It's a cat. Why have you got a cat? I'm taking it to my sister. This one guy looks at me with total contempt, shaking his head.

'You've come all the way from Jerusalem, and you want to see your sister, and you've brought her a *cat*?'

I lose it, just a little bit. 'Look,' I say, 'My sister loves this cat and I'm bringing it to her for her wedding, and the cat is really pissed, and I just went through all this shit on the Israeli side, and my sister is getting married exactly this minute with all my family there, so please just let me go so I can get to the wedding and give this cat to my sister. Yes, I have a cat. Yes, I'm taking it to my sister. No, there's nothing dangerous about the cat. Just let me pass.'

It seems to work. They accept the story, take down all my details – but then, last thing before they let me go, the Hamas guy says to me: 'God willing, one day soon we will come and liberate Jerusalem' – the subtext being that I'm a soft, cat-loving city boy and Palestine needs real men to do the real work.

I get in the nearest taxi.

In the end I made it to my sister's wedding. I arrived just as the bride and groom were walking together in the *zaffeh* procession into the grand reception. When my sister sees me, standing there in my jeans and stripy top because I haven't had time to change, she's so tearful and happy that I made it – and then she was just amazed when she saw the cat. Amina has such a sweet face when she's talking to animals.

'Oh, Lulu! Lulu! What a beautiful cat you are! You're in Gaza now! You'll be a Gaza cat!'

But there was also a little bit of something else. She told me I was crazy for bringing the cat with me through the checkpoints. She was very worried about the cat suffering on the journey.

And then a few weeks later, the cat disappeared. We don’t know why. Maybe she was traumatised and left home. Maybe someone took her. She was very beautiful, this pearly-white cat.

I just wanted to bring Amina something nice from Jerusalem for her wedding because I knew that once she was living in Gaza it would be very difficult for her to leave. It seemed like a great idea. She really loved that cat.

Jerusalemite Izzeldin Bukhari is the founder of Sacred Cuisine, an enterprise evoking spiritual aspects of Palestinian meat-free food that connect to his family’s centuries-long heritage in mystical Islam. He runs food tours and classes, as well as pop-up supper clubs around the world. He told this story in May 2024.

Ashraf Afifi

LET’S TWEET ABOUT IT

Let me tell you first about Taghreedah. I’m a latecomer to theatre. I started in my early twenties, in 2009, and it was quite embarrassing then to say you work in theatre. I trained for two years without telling my parents. Things have developed since then, and now there is a lot of respect for such work, including for women to participate. But to achieve that, we have had to navigate lots of rigid, old-fashioned thinking. Theatre can be a very important and effective tool for confronting social issues around rights, gender-based violence, child abuse and so on – especially since in Gaza there are serious constraints in the public sphere. But theatre groups here often received external funding, which came with strings attached. They would develop work that was didactic, making an obvious point and driving it home as if you were attending a lecture, not a play.

We wanted to be different. We wanted more independence, to create theatre that was free in its ideas and that allowed artists to work without constraints. It had to be deeper, less obvious, ironic, even satirical.

We chose the name Taghreedah, which means ‘tweet’ – literally the sound a bird makes – because a tweet is beautiful and universally affecting, even though it comes from a tiny source. And of course, there is the new meaning of ‘tweet’ as a message that can be liked and shared by people around the world beyond physical barriers. Taghreedah became a multi-disciplinary, multi-layered theatre group comprising all kinds of performers – actors, dancers, poets, singers – that forms part of the expansion of theatre in Gaza. All our plays are self-written; I direct and develop scripts, blending

different aspects of the performing arts, pushing theatre to speak in new languages.

The last play we did, in 2021, was *Barzakh* (‘Afterlife’). We wanted to register our rejection of the current state of politics across Palestine. Our lives are seen as worthless, and we are being sacrificed for no reason. Producing such a play, especially in Gaza, could have caused us problems, but these issues felt to us like the elephant in the room. Let’s use art to open this conversation, we thought. Let’s tweet about it.

All the characters in the play are dead, but their souls are still hanging over their graves – they have issues to resolve before they can float off to heaven. There is a young woman who died long ago, before the occupation. She is sweet and innocent, awaiting perfect love. Contrasting with her is a military man who fought with the PLO in its glory years. What he wanted most in life was World War Three. He is an ideologue who died while eagerly anticipating nuclear conflict.

Then there is Umm Ali, an older woman whose life was centred on an easy calculation: if each family contributes ten martyrs, she said, we will reach more than a million – enough to liberate Palestine. In her own family she counted nine, but her soul cannot rest until her family’s tenth martyr fulfils their destiny.

Umm Ali’s daughter also floats on stage. She died furious at her son, who left Gaza for a life of safety and opportunity in Spain, betraying his nation.

The central character, Mahmoud, embodied everything that upsets us about Gaza. He died as a martyr on the border fence, reflecting another drama that took place in Gaza in 2018, known as the Great March of Return. Some people took this seriously as spontaneous expression, though many saw it as a deeply manipulative event staged in real time, in which people lost their lives or their limbs for a cause that kept shifting from the right of return to opposing the blockade, to claiming $100 a month. Eventually they saw suitcases of cash arriving from the Gulf and understood that their bodies had become a way to raise funds.

Thousands of young people went to the border. Spirits were high, despite the shooting and the tear gas. They reached the fence and, with their bare hands, started to pull down the barbed wire, to cross the border and reclaim the homeland. Among them was a friend of mine, Ahmed al-Udayni. I thought he appreciated his life in the way I appreciated his life. I thought he knew not to get into a situation of putting himself on the line to die so cheaply. But he was martyred that day, among dozens of others.

I haven't been able to shake that image of the frontline soldier who dies without knowing whether the battle was won or lost, whether his objective was achieved or whether he died in vain, whether the cause he believed in was the same cause his commanders believed in.

So Mahmoud, in the play, is a reimagining of my dead friend. The other ghosts ask him how he died, and he tells the whole story: the mobilisation, the crowds running to the wire – and in his enthusiasm he gets carried away, and imagines that he and his fellow fighters actually crossed the border and liberated the land, and that crowds followed them through the broken fence to return home.

Inspired by such an achievement, the others can finally rest in peace. Mahmoud is a hero for all. But while they wait for a statue to be raised to him, or for his name to be attached to a plaza in liberated Jerusalem, a new character enters, the martyr of today. The ghosts ask how he died, and he tells a simple story of occupation and poverty and hardship. The ghosts are confused. Surely the occupation is over, they say: Mahmoud told us everyone rebelled, tore down the fence, liberated the land. Then realisation dawns. Occupation has not ended. Nobody has returned. We are still trapped. And the money is still flowing.

The ghosts gather in fury to declare:

Stop this farce before your heart stops beating.
Stop making weapons if you say you want peace.
Why is a child crying?
Why is a mother mourning?
Why has a man been killed?

Why do we allow war to steal children’s identity?
Stop starting wars that have no meaning but death.
Remember there is a homeland to the east whose people need direction.
A free person will never be silent as long as there is a cause.
This is the dream of the dead to the living.
This is the message of the land to the people.

Barzakh took more than four months in production, but it was extremely successful, merging drama, choreography, lighting, music and poetry to convey the message that what’s happening to us is not only unfair, but we reject it. However, the opening night could have been a disaster: it was August, with temperatures above forty degrees – and the air-conditioning in the hall broke down. The theatre was like burning hell, everybody was dripping with sweat, but not one person left. Everyone stayed in their seats. They just fanned themselves with the programme. They wanted to be there. That touched me very much.

And, of course, the message today is the same as it was in 2021: stop this farce before our hearts stop beating.

Writer and director Ashraf Afifi was born in Gaza in 1986. He has taught for many years with the Theater Days Foundation and other arts bodies in Gaza, and has directed dozens of plays for children and adults. In 2016 he created the Taghreedah Arts Team: forty-five young performers from around Gaza developing new drama and dance works for the stage. He was speaking in May 2024.

Amani Shaltout

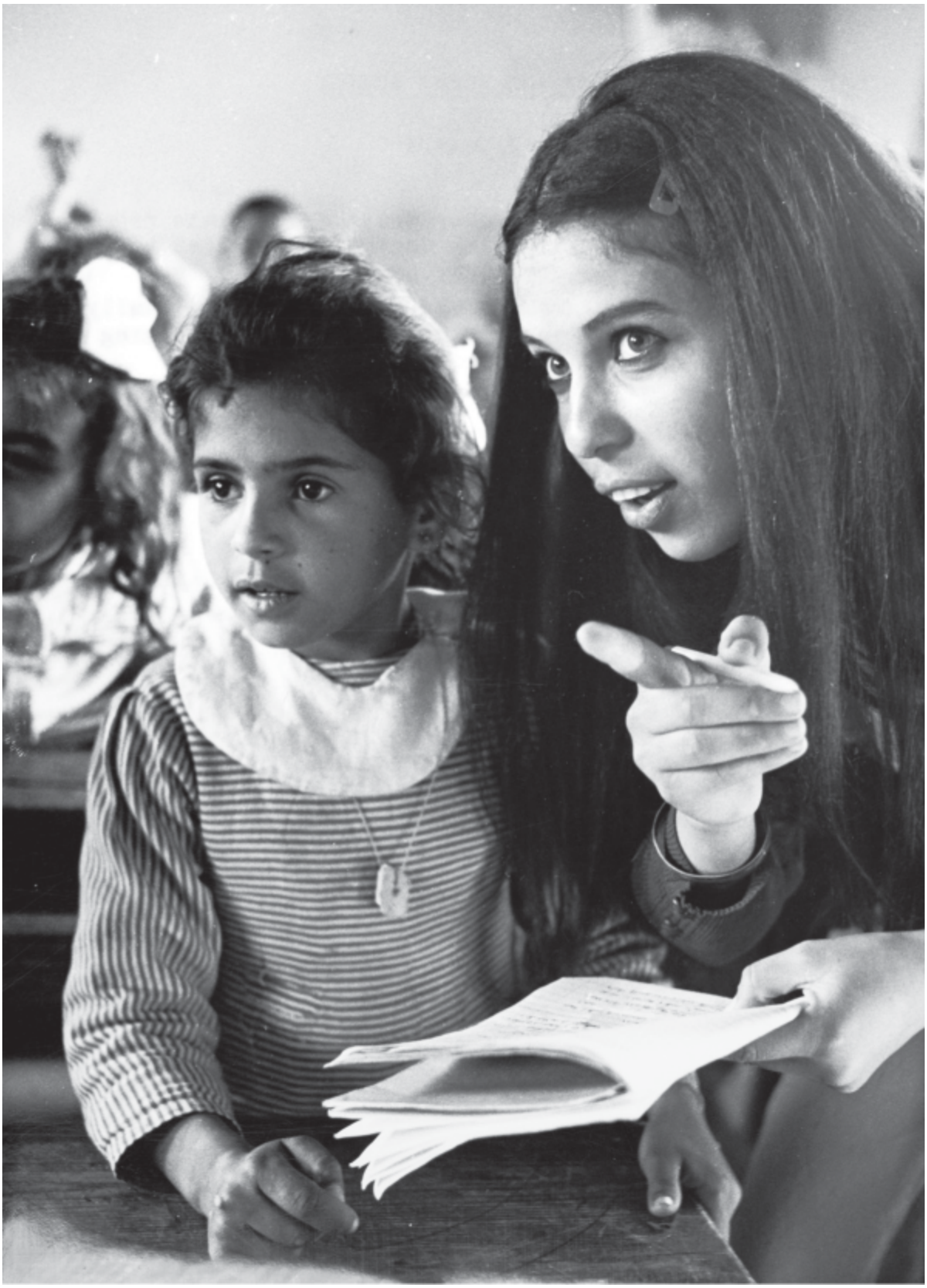
EDUCATION IS OUR WAY FORWARD

UNRWA's photo archive is unique in Gaza. It holds slides, negatives, prints and film from the Nakba until today, including some items from before UNRWA started operating in 1950. Images document life conditions for the refugees and UNRWA's responses to their needs in education, health, social services, microfinance projects, women's support and so on. The archive holds material by UNRWA-assigned photographers only (apart from a few items from 1948 and 1949, which are credited to the UN). Part of my job is to train photographers to UNRWA requirements; they send images to my office monthly for uploading with full metadata to the archive and to UNRWA's public galleries on PhotoShelter. We co-ordinate with UNRWA archives in Amman, Beirut and elsewhere, and all physical materials are stored correctly, under controlled temperature and humidity. Before this current nightmare, the archive was open to the public on request. We would help university students searching for material, NGOs assembling exhibitions or events, filmmakers, authors and journalists, though we hold only some material here in Gaza. Most is held at UNRWA headquarters in Amman.

Since 2013 everything held here and in Amman – every image, every slide, every negative, about half a million audiovisual items in total – has been digitised. We had no plan to move physical materials out of Gaza: we always assumed that United Nations property would not be targeted, but what has happened in this war is beyond imagination or expectation. Israeli attacks have severely damaged our building. I don't know what state the

archive is in. We can only wait for this hell to end, so we can see for ourselves. Digital materials are stored locally, but we keep remote backups and I can confirm that the complete UNRWA archive is safe and secure.

My favourite images are about education, showing children from the 1950s and ’60s learning in the open air or in tents, or sitting on the sand studying. They show the desire and will to improve ourselves, to confront the toughest of situations. The literacy rate in Gaza is ninety-seven per cent and people are proud that Gaza has one of the Arab world’s highest percentages of postgraduates. Education is our way forward.



Examples of UNRWA’s social support and vocational training. Above: teacher Najwa Abu Haibeh in Khan Yunis, 1974. Facing above: a retail entrepreneur, 1978. Facing below: volleyball at the Jabalia camp’s women’s centre, 1969.

Amani Shaltout was born in the Maghazi camp, Deir al-Balah, in 1973. She has worked for UNRWA since 1999 and is responsible for managing UNRWA's photo and film archive in Gaza City. We have compiled this piece from voice notes she recorded while displaced and under bombardment in Nuseirat camp in May 2024.

332 BCE

For two hundred years, Gaza had been Persian. It was calm, cultured and rich. So when the marauding Macedonian Alexander (later ‘the Great’) started carving a swathe through the Persian Empire in what is now Turkey and Syria, Gazans were worried. By July 332 BCE Alexander had conquered Tyre, in modern Lebanon, and was moving south. That autumn he besieged Gaza, attacking the walls, digging tunnels and deploying artillery platforms with giant catapults to subdue the defenders. The Gazans resisted, reportedly for weeks, but the end was inevitable. Yet when the eunuch Batis, Gaza’s commander – or, in some readings, its king – refused to surrender, Alexander had a rope inserted behind Batis’s Achilles’ tendons and then had him dragged backwards behind a chariot around the walls of Gaza until he expired.

100 CE

Frankincense has been a luxury commodity ever since there have been humans to smell it. Greece and Rome used vast quantities of the stuff in religious ceremonies: Emperor Nero is said to have burned an entire year’s supply at the funeral of his second wife, Poppaea. It was all imported. Frankincense is the hardened sap of *Boswellia sacra*, a tree found only on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the adjacent shores of Somalia. From roughly the sixth century BCE, for about a thousand years, traders brought frankincense overland by camel caravan from what is now Oman and Yemen to Gaza, for shipping across the Mediterranean. The Greek historian Plutarch called Gaza *aromatophora*, ‘bringer of perfume’, and the city grew wealthy handling frankincense, wine, Indian pepper, ginger and sugar. Silk, glass and gold went the other way, eastwards as far as China. Lavish temples honoured Zeus, Apollo and Aphrodite and, by the

second century, cosmopolitan Gaza hosted communities of Christians, Zoroastrians, Samaritans and Jews.

500 CE

Christian Gaza grew into a prosperous, highly educated society. By the sixth century philosophers and orators, notably Prokopios of Gaza and his student Chorikios, led an intellectual movement that became known as the Gaza School. In among the city's burgeoning markets, academies of rhetoric hosted public performance, their scholars conducting detailed studies of scripts and writing. The orator Zosimus of Gaza wrote a rhetorical lexicon. Gaza had a theatre and public baths, churches and a large synagogue adorned with mosaic art, and a Rose Festival, held every spring, for which Greek grammarian John of Gaza wrote love poems.

1660

Islamic tradition speaks of *Ghazzat Hashim*, Hashim's Gaza, linking the city with the Prophet Muhammad's great-grandfather, who died there in 497 CE. Hashim's tomb survives today, though the mosque built over it – originally twelfth century – was damaged by an Israeli airstrike in 2023. By the fourteenth century, Muslim Gaza was 'large and populous', according to the traveller Ibn Battuta, with mosques, colleges, a hospital and a racecourse. Plague (1348), flooding (1352) and locusts (1401) might have done for it, but the conquering Ottomans favoured Gaza, installing Ridwan Pasha as governor around 1570. The Ridwan dynasty ruled Gaza for one hundred and twenty years, overseeing a period of prosperity. With the agricultural economy flourishing, relations with neighbouring Bedouin peaceful and the city's Jewish and Christian minorities protected, by 1660 a French consul was moved to describe Gaza as the capital of Palestine.

1799

Having invaded and subdued Ottoman-ruled Egypt in the second half of 1798, French commander Napoleon marched north to face the Ottoman Army in Syria. He first attacked the fort at el-Arish in Sinai, scattering its

defenders and quickly seizing control. Facing little resistance on arrival in Gaza in February 1799, he wrote that its ‘forests of olive trees’ reminded him of Languedoc, then complained about the ‘terrible weather, with a great deal of thunder and rain’. He stayed two days before proceeding to Jaffa, where he murdered several thousand civilians, and Akka, where he was defeated and forced to retreat.

1917

In early 1917 a British expeditionary force set out from Egypt on a campaign intended to end Ottoman control of Palestine and Syria. They attacked Gaza on 26 March with infantry and cavalry supported by field artillery, but despite almost taking the city withdrew at nightfall. ‘Delightful country,’ wrote one British officer. ‘Cultivated to perfection and the crops look quite good if not better than most English farms, chiefly barley and wheat.’ The second battle, on 17–19 April, against a stronger Ottoman defence, was another defeat and, after a summer of stalemate, British forces only took Gaza on 7 November in a third battle, following sustained bombardment that reduced the deserted city to ruins. A month later, they were in Jerusalem. More than three thousand British dead – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh – lie buried in Gaza’s war cemetery, which was damaged in October 2023 by Israeli bombardment, while a memorial beside the Thames in London commemorates the Imperial Camel Corps’s losses during the battles for Gaza.

Gaza in ruins after the British attack of 1917, and the city rebuilt a few years later (probably 1920s).

Ahmed Masoud

A BRIDGE TO PEOPLE

Gaza was fascinating to me as a child. There were nine of us, my siblings and I, and we had a small three-bedroom house – just block walls and asbestos sheeting. It was freezing in winter and an oven in summer. I was the middle child and was forgotten most of the time, which was fantastic. I spent most of my childhood on the street, which I loved. I went to friends whenever I wanted. I used to go to Khan Yunis a lot, where my uncles were, and to stay with my grandfather, who lived to 110. He would still go fishing at the age of ninety, and told all these stories about Beirut and how he used to walk to Damascus.

But anywhere in Gaza, Israel as an occupying force is all around you. You can see the fence. When you're on the beach, the power station chimneys at Ashkelon port, just up the coast, are like Mordor, the Eye of Sauron staring at you. When I was young, there was an Israeli settlement beside Khan Yunis. Its fence came right down to the sea. One day – I was maybe ten years old, sitting on the sand mending fishing nets with my uncle and my grandfather – I remember seeing an Israeli family drive onto the beach right beside me, on the other side of the fence, in their modern four-wheel-drive car. They brought floats, beach balls, water pistols, inflatable rings, a net and racquets – I was staring in bewilderment at all these things. Why did they have them and I didn't? One of the adults came in close, wearing his gun, and he said something in Hebrew, but my uncle pulled me away, then told me off. I don't know what it was about, even now. But that

was a moment of realisation for me, that there's something much bigger going on out there, life is not the same for everyone as it is for me.

I started learning English pretty young – my dad was really into education – and in 1998 I went to Al-Azhar University in Gaza City to study literature. Until I read Dickens, nobody told me child labour was wrong. Quite the opposite. At school I would spend afternoons working in the market or on a building site. As a child of eleven and twelve, during school holidays I was bringing in sixty shekels a day (worth about US$50 in 2024), picking flowers in the Israeli settlement for export. It was hard – I had to leave at 5am, work twelve hours straight, and would come home all scratched by thorns – but it earned a big part of the family income. That's what you do. So, when I read *Oliver Twist* and identified personally, that was an emotional moment. Inside that prison, you don't realise how hard it is until you step out.

But still my memories of Gaza at that time are beautiful – hanging out on the beach, swimming, flirting with girls, going to the British Council café because they didn't segregate by gender. And it was a period of hope: the airport was open, lots of artists came to Gaza, there were concerts, parties, a film festival, the Gaza Book Fair.

Children running through Gaza City’s sandy alleyways, 1990s.

Then the Intifada began in 2000. For the first time we saw helicopters, warplanes bombing. There were checkpoints everywhere. I lost good friends, a very dear cousin. That’s when I decided I couldn’t stay any more, the grief was too much. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t see. We were surrounded by bombs, every minute the Israelis are on your doorstep. There was no way out. I got very angry. I started thinking of stupid things around revenge. But my dad was insisting I complete my education, so, when an offer came to repeat my final year of university in London, I took it.

Many Gaza people feel purpose. That allows you to be patient, tolerant of immense hardship. But it’s not clear what the purpose is. Resistance for sure, that sense is incredibly strong. Arafat called us *shaab al-jabbareen*, ‘the mighty people’. That feeds into years and years – centuries – of cultural pride. Gaza is an identity I choose, rather than one that is imposed on me. I see it as a bridge to people.

Writer and director Ahmed Masoud was born in 1981 and grew up in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza. He has lived in London since 2002. His writing focuses on the culture, society and people of Gaza. His novels include Vanished *(2015) and* Come What May *(2022), and his plays have toured theatres in the UK and Europe and been produced by BBC Radio and WDR Radio in Germany. In 2021, he founded the PalArt Collective, which seeks to amplify Palestinian voices in the arts. He was speaking in April 2024.*

Selma Dabbagh

SCREEN FRAGMENTS OF GAZA

I last went to Gaza twelve years ago. We arrived at night, the moon hanging over cemeteries that slid into the sea. I remember darkness, the lack of electricity, the stars, historic buildings and shelled apartment blocks. Vibrant, joking, ballsy students in lecture halls. Fish restaurants. Hotels with views of the sea. Dedication and fatigue. A sense of a population that has been jilted, abandoned. A sense of enclosure and surveillance. Joy being taken where it could be found. A love of children and soft toys. Political slogans and romantic graffiti. Pride in one's locality, one's family, one's camp.

Now, I see Gaza on my phone screen: a rolling stream of slaughter, destruction, starvation and humiliation.

Even when I'm not looking at my phone any more, these images replay themselves in front of my eyes as though projected onto a screen that hangs between me and my London reality. I had days where all I could see was a young woman talking to her camera. She stands against a white wall and has a black scarf around her face, nude lips, carved features. It's a short video. She's aiming to provide a crisp, professional account. She is seeking to provide the viewer with evidence. Her account speeds up as she gives it and becomes overwhelmed. The words – 'They dropped white phosphorous and sound bombs on Beit Lahia,' 'Everyone running like mad men, they don't know where,' 'They are dropping leaflets telling us to evacuate,' 'I cannot describe,' 'I have lost my people,' 'I don't know where they are,' 'I am staying,' 'May God have mercy on us' – are some of her last.

The caption tells me this is Ayat al-Khadour. That she was a journalist. That that was her final video. She was one of more than a hundred journalists killed in Gaza since 7 October. Her post does not have so many ‘likes’, relatively speaking. I click ‘like’, but what is there to like? It is two steps away from being a snuff movie, but I want it to go viral. I want it broadcast in Times Square. I want it playing on a loop in the Knesset, the White House, the Houses of Parliament, in the corporate lobbies of all the arms manufacturers. I want a monument to Ayat al-Khadour as big as the Statue of Liberty, bigger than Nelson’s Column.

Another image on Instagram is more colourful. Blue bags in brown sand. An art installation piece for the Biennale maybe? What am I looking at here, after the advertisement for a new kind of garlic crusher ends? Blue bags, many of them, of various sizes, lined up and tied like portions of leftovers about to go in the freezer. It is a long, mass grave of more than a hundred people. They have hurried scribbles on them, scrawled in marker. Not enough to identify them by. ‘Bodies from the al-Shifa hospital’, says the caption. Images of genocide reach me through the lens of social media. After the bodies is an advertisement for stomach exercises, before the same image appears again from a different media outlet. Mass graves. Patients with drips still attached, I hear later. No chance for parents to find their children, for children to find their parents. No chance for anyone to find Ayat al-Khadour, if she is there, but she wouldn’t be there as she was killed in Jabalia. She didn’t even have time to finish her journalistic account, her faith in citizen journalism running parallel with her faith in God until her last breath, no time to reach a hospital before the undocumented wounds on her body took away her life.

And then there’s the boy who goes to his parents’ grave every morning to hug the mound of sand that covers them. He curls his body over it every day to be close to them. I want to scoop him up out of the photograph and bring him into my life, my home. Feed him and restore trust. But I do not know where he is, this boy. I do not know his name. Even if I helped him, he is one of seventeen thousand children who have no family with them in this sealed-in, apocalyptic landscape where the drones don’t stop for a

second to allow you to sleep, where the tents are rotten with holes, where raw sewage runs in the streets. He was in the south of Gaza probably, this boy, as by the time I see him few images are coming from the north. Up there is a different circle of hell. It could be minutes away, it could be on the moon. Gaza's north and south are separated by a wall of surveillance and tanks.

The soldiers of occupation appear to be loving what they are doing to Gaza and its people. I see them being well fed at mass buffets in stadiums. They make videos of themselves indulging in various japes: blowing up apartment buildings in their children's names, pretending they are real estate agents offering seafront apartments for sale. They enjoy smashing up children's toys in shops, and destroying food supplies in trucks and storage centres. They like rounding men up, stripping them, tying plastic cables around their wrists and pointing their guns at them as they huddle in purpose-built trenches. They shoot them or their mothers, or their grandmothers, or their daughters, or fleeing civilians on donkeys waving white flags. It is all fair game to them. The women soldiers dance and take duck-face selfies. The men try on the underwear they find in the drawers of bedrooms they are ransacking. They video themselves torturing stripped, blindfolded men. It is a jamboree of carnage. It is a celebration of sadism. It is still going on.

Selma Dabbagh is a British-Palestinian lawyer and writer. Her novel Out of It *(2011), set in Gaza, was a* Guardian *Book of the Year, and she edited the anthology* We Wrote in Symbols: Love and Lust by Arab Women Writers *(Saqi Books, 2021). Her journalism and short fiction are published by outlets including* Granta *and the* London Review of Books. *She contributed this essay in June 2024.*

Hiba Abu Nada

YOUR VOW IS TRUE

7 OCTOBER 2023, 6.54AM

We go to sleep thinking about very ordinary things, a university exam, buying a new piece of clothing, worrying about applying to a job – then suddenly the sound of the alarm changes, exams are cancelled, schools and universities are shut down, gunpowder blasts everywhere, Al Jazeera turns red, we turn on the radio, Telegram, in our minds we start to reschedule all our plans. In Gaza, everything changes in an instant.

8 OCTOBER 2023, 11.30AM

Our newsfeeds are funeral homes / memorial services / obituary pages. We move from page to page as if walking through a square full of funerals packed side by side. God, the weight of these days.

9 OCTOBER 2023, 12.34PM

– Where are these fusillades coming from?
– From our hearts, each bursting from the agony of a Gazan.

9 OCTOBER 2023, 4.52PM

In every previous war, there was some kind of pattern to the entity's targets. One time it would be families, another time mosques, another time streets, another time border areas or town centres, another time high-rises – there was some kind of plan for the explosions that we could grasp, we the ones under the explosions; and based on that we would deduce the goals and the trajectory and how long we could expect the war to last.

This time there is no pattern. Everything is being bombed. Every previous war is being squeezed into this war, Gaza from the north to the south being bombed in a chaotic, catastrophic manner, mass butchery, senseless assassination of everything. But it is our endurance and our faith in God that allows us to look at the planes and become calm before we start to cry, or when we start to cry after the silence and say: O God, we have no one but You.

9 OCTOBER 2023, 6.39PM

Dear friends, we are entering a chapter in which we will be isolated from the world so that the city can be eradicated in the shortest time possible, a time when we won't be able to communicate with anyone inside or outside the city. Night hasn't fallen yet and the shelling is like hell. Until then cover us in a flood of prayer and send a message, or even a word, of steadfastness and freedom on our behalf. We entrust Gaza and everything within her to God, the Guardian, the Almighty.

10 OCTOBER 2023

I Grant You Refuge

1.
I grant you refuge
in invocation and prayer.
I bless the neighbourhood and the minaret
to guard them
from the rocket
from the moment
it is a general's command
until it becomes
a raid.
I grant you and the little ones refuge,
the little ones who
change the rocket's course

before it lands
with their smiles.

2.
I grant you and the little ones refuge,
the little ones now asleep like chicks in a nest.
They don’t walk in their sleep toward dreams.
They know death lurks outside the house.
Their mothers’ tears are now doves
following them, trailing behind
every coffin.

3.
I grant the father refuge,
the little ones’ father who holds the house upright
when it tilts after the bombs.
He implores the moment of death:
‘Have mercy. Spare me a little while.
For their sake, I’ve learned to love my life.
Grant them a death
as beautiful as they are.’

4.
I grant you refuge
from hurt and death,
refuge in the glory of our siege,
here in the belly of the whale.
Our streets exalt God with every bomb.
They pray for the mosques and the houses.
And every time the bombing begins in the North,
our supplications rise in the South.

5.
I grant you refuge
from hurt and suffering.
With words of sacred scripture
I shield the oranges from the sting of phosphorous
and the shades of cloud from the smog.
I grant you refuge in knowing
that the dust will clear,
and they who fell in love and died together
will one day laugh.

12 OCTOBER 2023, 2.30PM

Entire family trees have fallen, with everyone in it. Gaza transforms into a wasteland, a wide-open graveyard stretching from the doorstep of the Arab League to the podium of the United Nations, and we stare into our graves in silence, heaviness, submission to God.

15 OCTOBER 2023, 5.19PM

That sound we hear is the sound of death that has passed over us to choose another. We say: thank God, the last sound they heard was not the sound of the missile. Those who hear the sound of the missile survive. We are alive until further notice.

18 OCTOBER 2023, 9.17PM

If we die, know that we are willing and steadfast, and tell of us that we are people with a rightful claim.

20 OCTOBER 2023, 4.52PM

Before God, we in Gaza are either martyrs or witnesses to liberation and we all wait to learn where we will fall. We are all waiting, O God. Your vow is true.

Father and son at Friday prayers in the Omari Mosque in Jabalia, 2005.

Hiba Abu Nada (1991–2023) was a Palestinian writer and educator. Her novel Oxygen is Not for the Dead *was recognised in the 2017 Sharjah Awards for Arab Creativity. Shortly after the final entry in this diary, on the evening of 20 October 2023, an Israeli airstrike on the Manara neighbourhood of Khan Yunis killed Hiba and her family in their home.*

Youmna El Sayed

THIS WAR

This war has been different from all wars in Gaza. I've never seen anything like it. We are direct targets of the Israeli Army. A press vest and press helmet should guarantee our safety, but we have become afraid to carry our own equipment – and other people have become afraid of me. They feel that my presence as a reporter brings danger. [When my family was threatened on 30 October 2023 by a phone call from the Israeli Army telling us to leave our house or be killed,] my twelve-year-old daughter asked: 'Mum, are we going to die because of you?' It was one of the worst moments of my life. Our neighbours wanted us to leave because being a journalist I was a target.

[I was reporting outside Gaza's al-Nasser Hospital when an ambulance pulled up, and a little boy, no more than eleven or twelve, got out.] I asked the boy if he was OK, and then I saw that there was blood dripping from his backpack, which he was carrying against his chest. Seeing the blood upset me very much. He said to me: 'Do you know what I have here? My little brother Ahmed.' A doctor opened the bag. I was rooted to the spot. Did I really just see a five-year-old's body in another kid's backpack?

I have seen many similar scenes. Every time it happens I feel faint. There is nothing I can do or say. The whole world has seen these pictures. But more people must find out what is happening from journalists in their own countries, not just from Palestinian reporters. International journalists must stand up for integrity and objectivity. They should not be reporting 'Palestinian children have died in an explosion.' They must clearly say

what happened – that an Israeli missile attacked a civilian home and killed this number of children and injured this number of civilians. That is proper journalism.

Youmna El Sayed is a Gaza correspondent for Al Jazeera English, and holder of the 2024 Pimentel Fonseca journalism award. She spoke to Julia Lindblom and Hana Al-Khamri for Journalisten *in March 2024. These excerpts are translated from the Swedish.*

Ibrahim Yaghi

THE PUTRID CORRIDOR

It was 9am on 11 December 2023. I was having breakfast with my family at our home on al-Meshal Street in the al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City when my brother's phone rang. The prefix showed it was not a Gaza number. My cousin Hesham answered it on speaker.

'Hello Hesham, this is the Israeli Army,' said a voice in Arabic.

The room fell silent. My mother, aunts and cousins burst into tears.

'Leave your home and go to the humanitarian corridor,' the voice said. 'Take your IDs and a white flag. Now.'

Hesham replied: 'We have five elderly people with chronic diseases and injuries, including my uncle who is paralysed.'

'That doesn't concern me,' the Israeli soldier said. 'Find a solution and evacuate to the south or you and your family will die under the rubble.' He ended the call.

Somehow, the Israeli Army knew to call my brother's phone – and somehow they knew my cousin Hesham would answer. They seem to know everything about us. They have admitted this. They know where we are at all times. They know which Palestinians will be killed in every airstrike. 'Everything is intentional,' one Israeli military source has said. 'We know exactly how much collateral damage there is in every home.'

I felt as if time were suspended. I couldn't hear, move or think. I was supposed to be helping others in greater need than myself, but I was the one who needed help.

Then my father yelled: ‘Start packing! Prepare yourself for whatever comes next and help get your uncle ready.’

I gathered some clothes and started to think about the trek south from our home to al-Bureij camp, twenty kilometres away. I carried my uncle over to his wheelchair and put him in. As we took him downstairs, I felt tears welling up. We were leaving everything. Our family’s history was in that home and we were abandoning it, not knowing if we would ever return.

We left at 10.30am and reached Salah al-Din Street, an area designated as a ‘safe’ zone, where we joined thousands of other refugees and, as ordered, raised a white flag, the emblem of surrender, and began walking. There were so many people that I got separated from my family. With every passing minute, hunger gnawed at our stomachs, a constant reminder of our desperate plight.

You could describe the so-called humanitarian corridor in many ways, but it was not human or pleasant. I would call it a putrid corridor. The road reeked of rotting flesh. God knows how many people had already been killed on that road, their decomposing corpses scattered around us.

By 2.30pm I and thousands of others had been walking for hours. Beside me was an elderly man clearly struggling to keep up. He was dehydrated and on the verge of collapse, and he stopped to drink some water. By doing so he delayed people behind him. Next thing I knew he was on the ground and his blood was all over my face. Israeli occupation forces had shot him dead in cold blood in front of my eyes. Bullets began flying everywhere. They were shooting at us to get us to run. I had a knee injury and the pain was unbearable, but I ran anyway. I saw an Israeli tank moving towards us, and ran as fast as I could, my knee getting worse and worse. Then I tripped and fell, injuring my head, but got up and carried on running.

At the ‘safe’ end of the putrid corridor, I found my family. We reached al-Bureij Camp at 5pm and hugged each other before trying to make ourselves comfortable on the unforgiving concrete of the road. We were alone, vulnerable and exposed to the elements, living on the streets of al-Zawayda, a neighbourhood between al-Bureij and Deir al-Balah. Our home, our haven of love, tenderness and cherished memories, was gone.

Now the boom of explosions shatters any calm. Panic seizes each one of us as the sky erupts in flames, casting an eerie glow of chaos and despair. Every night, as death looms menacingly close, my family and I cling to each other, trembling with fear and desperation, praying that daybreak will bring respite.

Ibrahim Yaghi is a Palestinian journalist, human rights activist, poet and writer living in Gaza. He contributed this testimony to Palestine Nexus *in April 2024.*

Hossam al-Madhoun

A WAR DIARY

THE VALLEY OF DEATH – 16 NOVEMBER 2023

My eldest brother, sixty years old, with his sick, blind wife and his two sons, Mohammed, twenty-three, and Hisham, fifteen, have sought refuge at al-Shifa Hospital since 12 October 2023. My brother's wife suffers from kidney failure. She needs dialysis three times a week. That's why they chose to shelter at al-Shifa. Many of the fifty thousand displaced people inside the hospital are families of those with chronic conditions. They're there so they can access health services more easily.

Yesterday, my brother and his family decided to leave. They were certain they would be killed if they stayed. They headed south – my brother, carrying sixty years of agony, poverty, hard work and pain on his shoulders; his son Mohammed pushing a wheelchair with his mother in it; the mother holding a bag of clothes and some food on her lap; and Hisham, the young boy, carrying a bag and backpack.

Amid the bombing, the shooting, the drone noise and the warplanes, they walked three kilometres. Streets were empty except for some people also carrying what they could of their belongings. Streets? Destroyed, damaged, big holes, water leakage, sewage leakage – like walking through a minefield, side by side with death. There were dead bodies on the road. It is no different from Dante's *Inferno*. Maybe Dante would be even more inspired if he walked this route. They found a donkey cart to give them a ride to al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah, eighteen kilometres from Gaza City.

First thing in the morning, I go there. On foot. Walking total today is 11.5 kilometres.

I arrive, people everywhere. The front and back yards of the hospital are full of the displaced and injured and their families. At the hospital gate were three corpses, just arrived after the bombing of a house in Nuseirat.

I ask about any newcomers. There are many. I keep looking until I find my brother's family, in a small space of two metres square. My brother has aged decades in a few days. Hisham is sitting beside his mother, doing nothing, saying nothing. I try to talk to him. He does not respond. Hisham, the boy I love the most, who, every time I visit, runs up to me for a hug. Hisham is not responding. What happened?

I don't know if it is the psychological first-aid techniques I've picked up, or the power of love, but after fifteen minutes Hisham looked at me, fell into my arms and cried, cried as he never did before. His body shook. Cry, child, cry as much as you want, cry until your cries reach the sky or touch a moving heart somewhere in this mad world.

SHATTERED WORDS – 24 NOVEMBER 2023

What can words do when you feel they are unable to describe, explain, to express a feeling or an event? Words will not reflect what I see and feel, what I want to describe.

Yesterday I heard about a bombing. I went there to find out what happened. It was a building of four floors, housing thirty-seven people. They all died: men, women, boys, girls, all of them. My friend's daughter, whom I've known since she was seven years old, was hanging the clothes of her dead child on the laundry line, as if nothing had happened.

I looked at her. What words can describe this? Damn it, where are the words? Why don't words help? Words are shattered. Words are crippled. No words can explain. She lost her husband and her six-year-old son. The son was buried. The husband is still under the rubble. I hate words.

And then I hear people talking about Mahmoud, my friend. He is her husband's uncle and took refuge at the family home with his wife and children, his brother and wife and children, and their parents. They all died too.

No! Please, no. Not Mahmoud. He can't be dead. I can't accept this. Mahmoud is alive. Please tell me he is alive. I saw him in Nuseirat market three days ago. We hugged, we talked, we laughed. You can't meet Mahmoud and not laugh. He looks so good, so smart, well dressed, always with shaved face and shaved head. That big smile never leaves his face for a single minute. His beautiful smile fills the air with joy and happiness. He puts people at ease. Mahmoud's smile opens all the windows for hope and comfort. His heart is bigger than the world itself. He is the one who is always there to help, to support, to solve problems. He is there for everyone, as if God created him for other people. He can't be dead. Oh God, Mahmoud, my friend. Why? Why? Why?

All these words are nothing. They reveal nothing about my friend. They make him small, and he is much more. Words are cursed. Words are weak. Words are helpless. Words won't say what I want to say.

FAMINE – 10 DECEMBER 2023

The market is full of people… but it's not a market any more. Shops that haven't been destroyed are closed. There is nothing in them to buy. Some locally produced items are sometimes available in the market, but Gaza's main agricultural area east of Khan Yunis is now a war zone. Here are a few examples, with prices converted to US dollars:

Item	*Before 7 Oct '23*	*Today*
Firewood, 1kg	$0.30	$1.00
Aubergines, 1kg	$0.50	$2.00
Green peppers, 1kg	$1.00	$2.00

Lemons, 1kg	$0.25	$2.50
Tomatoes, 1kg	$0.50	$3.00
Cucumbers, 1kg	$0.25	$3.50
Potatoes, 1kg	$0.25	$4.00
Sugar, 1kg	$0.80	$4.50
Salt, 1kg	$0.15	$7.00

Other marketplace items are those distributed by UNRWA, which people sell in whole or in part to buy other essentials. Some examples (in US dollars):

Item	*Before 7 Oct '23*	*Today*
Hand soap	$0.20	$1.00
Meat, tin	$1.50	$6.00
Cooking oil, 1 litre	$2.00	$7.00
Beans, tin	$5.00	$30.00
Bread flour, 25kg	$10.00	$150.00 (if available)
Toilet paper, roll	$2.00	No longer available
Tissues, box	$2.50	No longer available

And as for fresh fruit, eggs, dairy products, biscuits, sweets, cakes, pastries, ice cream, chocolate, chewing gum, juice, coffee, cooking gas, fuel, winter clothes, mattresses, blankets, carpets, plastic sheets…

MOTHER COURAGE (NOT BRECHT)
– 17 DECEMBER 2023

By the wall of the school, where people shelter, vendors lay out their few bits of merchandise on a little table, or a cardboard box, or a plastic sheet on the ground. Tins of meat, tuna, beans, cigarettes, sugar, rice. Some might make $200. Others barely $30. Trying to feed themselves for a day or two.

Among them a middle-aged woman with a veil covering most of her hair is baking flatbread in a mud oven, in front of a line of people waiting to buy. From time to time she calls to her son, seven or eight years old, to add wood to the fire beneath the oven. It's a normal scene in Gaza around the shelter-schools.

I was waiting in line when a journalist approached the woman for an interview. Without looking at him she said, 'You can see that I'm busy.' The journalist was patient and polite. He asked if he could film her as part of the market and life in the shelters. She shrugged, and the reporter gestured to the camera person to start filming.

'Have you been doing this for a long time?'

'Making bread? One month.'

'You built the mud oven?'

'No, I bought it from someone who built it but could not use it. He was too old for this work.'

'Are you from here? I mean Nuseirat Camp?'

(Putting a piece of dough in the oven and turning it over from time to time with a wooden stick): 'No. Not from here.' (To a customer) 'I don't have change for a hundred shekels. Find change and come back.'

'Where did you come from?'

'From many places since 12 October.'

'Like where?'

'Beit Hanoun. When they started bombing, my eldest son and father-in-law were killed. The bombs targeted a neighbour's home. They were all killed.' (She stops talking and continues her work. The journalist does not rush her. She raises her head, looks at the journalist for a second, then turns back to the oven and continues talking.) 'We moved to my family home in

Beach Camp. I was at the market with this little son when we heard a big explosion from an airstrike. I took my vegetables and rushed home. They bombed a nearby house and my parents and my husband were killed. I recognised my husband from his feet sticking out of the rubble, because two years ago he lost one toe in a work accident in Israel. He used to work in construction. My poor husband did not rest until he died.' (To her little son) 'Enough wood, we're almost done.' (To a customer) 'This will cost you four shekels.'

She looks at the journalist. He is still there holding the microphone towards her, and the camera is focused on her. 'So we moved to Zahra city, to my sister who is married and lives there. They followed us with the bombing. My daughter and my mother-in-law were killed. Then we came here – me and this little boy, my sister's son and my injured sister. We are at this school.' (She points at the building behind her.)

'How do you manage? Does UNRWA distribute food at the school?'

'Yes. They come every few days, give each family some tins of food, biscuits, soap – barely enough for one day. Anyway, we are still alive.'

'What about water? Hygiene? Toilets?'

'I wake up at 4am to join the queue for the toilet. At that time there's a line of between seven and fifteen people. Any later and the line will be fifty or sixty. We do our business and go back to sleep again. They give out plastic water bottles, but I don't use them. I sell them to get some money. We are surviving.'

'What do other women do?'

'There was a pregnant woman, we helped her to give birth in our classroom. She was lucky, it went smoothly. We care for each other in our classroom. They look after my sister and her two-year-old daughter while I'm out. Not like other classrooms. All day you hear screaming, shouting, cursing, arguments.'

'How do you get the wood for your oven?'

'In the beginning it was easy: I collected bits of wood from the streets and orchards nearby. Then I started to buy it from wood sellers. It was 1.2

shekels per kilo. Now it is three shekels, because there is no cooking gas or fuel. Everything is scarce.’

She starts to clear up. She puts the fire out, collects the unburnt sticks and covers the oven with a piece of material. She heads off towards the school, carrying her son. The camera operator follows her with his lens until she goes inside.

DAY AND NIGHT – 28 DECEMBER 2023

I wake at 6.30am every day and leave at eight for the office where I work, Ma’an Development Centre in Rafah. The building is full, there are people from everywhere trying to follow up on cases.

Rafah used to have 170,000 inhabitants. It is now hosting more than a million. At least half are on the streets, living in plastic tents that do not keep out cold or rain. Besides providing psychosocial support, we give food, we build kitchens and make hot meals, we hand out hygiene and dignity kits, we provide water tanks for shelters and groups of displaced people, we distribute clothes for children, we are trying to source better tents, we employ staff to clean the schools – especially the toilets – on a daily basis. All of this, on top of what UNRWA does, on top of what all the humanitarian organisations offer, meets virtually none of people’s real needs. With the ending of normality in Gaza, no one has any kind of income: 2.2 million people are seeking shelter and food, safety and dignity.

As much as I try to stay busy in order to avoid thinking, night comes. Dark thoughts invade my head. I fall asleep I don’t know how, and wake up as if I hadn’t slept at all.

SCARFACE – 18 FEBRUARY 2024

‘See yourself for a shekel!’ A boy in the market is holding a tiny piece of mirror, encouraging people to look at their faces for one shekel (about twenty-five US cents).

He is making a living by offering a very rare service. I have not seen my face since I arrived in Rafah, many weeks ago. You can't buy mirrors any more. Anyway, a mirror is something you forget about in this situation. How you look doesn't matter.

I ask him: 'Do you make money this way?'

He tells me he does. 'Lots of people want to see themselves,' he says. 'I make thirty shekels a day, or more. But you see him?' The boy points to a man down the street, walking away from us. 'He looked at his face, but gave the mirror back to me without paying. I'm not stopping him, though. He had a cut from his face all the way down to his chest, a long, horrible cut, not healed well at all. I think it was from shrapnel. He looked at his big, ugly scar and when he gave me back the mirror I saw he was crying, so I let him go.'

I took the boy's mirror and looked at my face. It's got very skinny. I have no mirror for shaving, so the stubble on my chin is all uneven, some bits longer than other bits. I'm a mess. I did not cry. I gave the child two shekels and continued walking.

UNACCOMPANIED CHILD – 27 FEBRUARY 2024

Today at 9.25am I had a call from a colleague asking for immediate intervention with an unaccompanied child who had been brought to Rafah by the Red Cross. She said the boy is believed to be suffering from severe malnutrition after being alone in the streets for eleven days, having left al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City more than a month ago, where his parents had been killed.

I reached the school-turned-shelter in fifteen minutes. The child was sitting on a chair eating rice and beans as if he had never eaten before. I moved my eyes away, so he did not feel that he was being watched.

He finished eating and started staring at the ceiling. I said: 'Hi, my name is Hossam.'

He looked at me slowly and said, 'I am Ahmad.'

‘Where are you from, Ahmad?’

‘Gaza.’

‘You are alone, where is your family?’

‘They are dead.’

The child was speaking flatly, with no feelings, no reactions. I asked: ‘How did you get here?’

‘They were shot dead. We left Shifa hospital by the sea road. They shot at us, my mother, my father, my older brother. People ran everywhere. I ran.’

I paused. ‘Do you have family in Rafah? Uncles, aunts?’

He looked at me, then looked up at the ceiling for a while without speaking. I waited.

‘I slept in the streets, in Nuseirat, in Zawaida, in Deir al-Balah. I was afraid. I am not afraid any more. I am cold.’

He was barefoot. I said: ‘I will get you a jacket now, and shoes. Someone will take care of you, is that OK?’

‘OK.’

‘Do you feel pain anywhere?’

‘Yes, my head, my legs, my stomach.’

‘OK, we will take you to the hospital for a check-up.’

‘Not Shifa!’

‘No, not Shifa.’

I have no idea what this boy has gone through. I should stop talking. He needs a child psychiatrist, and I don’t want to take the risk of asking him the wrong questions.

‘Do you want some hot tea?’

He moves his head to say yes.

Later in the day, I called the Ministry of Social Development to check on him. Their child protection officer had brought Ahmad to the SOS Village, an organisation hosting orphans and unaccompanied children. He is in good hands. If they can’t find relatives to take him, he will stay there. SOS has so far received sixty-six unaccompanied children like Ahmad. How many more are out there alone?

Child protection officer Hossam al-Madhoun works on humanitarian projects in Gaza. He specialises in psychosocial support through storytelling, and is the co-founder of Theatre for Everybody. Now displaced to Rafah, he and his theatre partner Jamal al-Rozzi are developing therapy programmes for children. These are edited excerpts from Hossam's war diary.

Abu al-Saeed al-Sousi

DOING THE BEST WE CAN

I am your brother Abu al-Saeed al-Sousi, owner of the oldest falafel shop in the Gaza Strip.

In the 2021 aggression, our shop in al-Rimal neighbourhood was destroyed – the whole building was destroyed. We worked hard and, thank God, opened another shop in Tal al-Hawa and another in al-Nasr, near the Bahloul roundabout. Now, all three shops have been destroyed, along with the factory and the entire production line, and we have been forced to move to Deir al-Balah.

We've started again from scratch here, with very basic equipment. It was really hard to find even these simple utensils we're using now, including the pan. We're frying over a wood fire, but wood doesn't give enough heat and it takes ages. People are standing here for two hours to get falafel – it's just not sustainable. Wood is terrible, it's so hard to make falafel like this, but we're doing the best we can, we can't do more than this – there's no electricity, no gas, but we still keep going.

We used to sell eight falafel balls for one shekel. Now we sell three for one shekel, and only because we are trying to help people. Why? Because before we could buy a kilo of chickpeas for four shekels – now it costs sixteen or seventeen shekels, and that's if you can even find it. Today you might find it, tomorrow maybe not. As for parsley, there isn't any. There are no vegetables. And there's no bread at all, for falafel or for anything else. It's a struggle to survive. We are struggling to make sure we simply stay

alive. We fight to maintain our existence. I hope one day, if God wills it, we will go back and rebuild the shop.

Abu al-Saeed al-Sousi was speaking to the Palestinian human rights organisation al-Haq in March 2024.

LEAF OF LIFE

Winter in the market of any Palestinian city sees country elders – women in intricately embroidered dresses, men whose hands speak of a life on the land – selling bundles of dark green leaves alongside other produce of the season. The leaf is khobbayzeh, a wild herb related to mallow, also known as cheeseweed, that can be found from Syria to Egypt and beyond, growing on the fringes of agricultural lands and beside paths and tracks. It is used like spinach or kale, added to salads, boiled in a stew or wilted and seasoned as a side dish, with a taste similar to dandelion.

The name derives from khobez (bread), which hints at the plant's cultural status. Khobbayzeh's lobed leaves resemble little flatbreads, but in Palestine, as across the Arab world, bread carries huge significance as the cornerstone of every meal, a divine gift, the basis of life and the most elemental of sustenance. This weed is more than a weed.

It grows throughout the Gaza Strip, though Gazans say the mix of sandy and muddy soils around Beit Hanoun, northeast of Gaza City, produces the tastiest variety. There are many recipes, the most popular of which is a simple sauté: roughly chop a large bunch of khobbayzeh leaves, add to frying onion with garlic – and, for an authentic Gazan touch, chilli – cover for fifteen or twenty minutes so the leaves break down, and serve hot. It's ridiculously healthy: anti-inflammatory, boosting the immune system, packed with antioxidants, and with a reputation in countless folk traditions for keeping winter bugs at bay.

Military orders imposed by Israel have severe consequences for seasonal and location-specific Palestinian food traditions. For instance, the gathering of zaatar (wild thyme or oregano) and akoub (cardoon, a type of artichoke) has been criminalised. The occupation disrupts every aspect of life, culinary culture included. But even so, as a food of the poor, cheap, versatile and widely available in large quantities, khobbayzeh was underappreciated. Middle-class urbanites sought trendier, and less gloopy,

culinary inspiration. But, as in so many other ways, Gaza has shifted the paradigm.

During the winter of 2023–24, under the horrific conditions of Israeli-directed famine, khobbayzeh rescued the starving of northern Gaza who refused to leave their homes. Unable to source fruit or vegetables, thousands survived by foraging for wild khobbayzeh. In response, vendors and greengrocers around Palestine – and beyond – are seeing a surge in demand for the weed, from people across the class spectrum. Khobbayzeh, already loaded with cultural resonance, has become a symbol of solidarity with the survivors of genocide, as well as a way to rediscover overlooked culinary traditions linking Palestinian land with the Palestinian table.

Laila El-Haddad

GAZA KITCHENS

FATEMA QAADAN

Fatema Qaadan greets us clad in a bright orange dress that matches her henna-dyed hair, one gold tooth in her radiant smile. A widow, she lives with her teenage daughter in a single room inherited from her late husband. It is a painfully hot summer day with a strong sandy wind and, to boot, it is Ramadan. No matter: in this tiny space, using a single detached gas burner, she prepares a splendid iftar meal for us of fatta bil aranib [meat stew with rice] from one of the rabbits she raises in the sandy lot abutting her room.

Because her family is small, Fatema doesn't qualify for most of the aid distribution packages. Tired of feeling helpless, she applied to participate in a new rabbit-rearing initiative she heard about. To the envy of her neighbours, she was awarded one of the few available grants, providing her with a breeding pair of rabbits, materials for a hutch and a few sacks of feed. She now boasts a flourishing family of young rabbits.

Originally from the village of Beit Jirja, near what is now Ashkelon, Fatema's family had orchards and livestock aplenty. When Beit Jirja was attacked in 1948, her parents fled with thousands of others, leaving their gold and property behind. They found refuge in the Beach Camp in Gaza City, only to flee again in 1970 when Israeli troops besieged the camp for months, razing their entire neighbourhood and killing one of Fatema's brothers.

Her family made their new home in nearby Beit Lahia, where she married but was widowed one year after her daughter was born. Fatema recalls: 'I asked my mother to make me a thobe [a traditional Palestinian

embroidered dress] for my wedding. She would sit up on the roof, sewing the dress while crying, thinking of her son, Hasan. She embroidered the pieces, red on white cloth, then said it was up to me to sew it together. So I did, and it's my pride and joy. This dress means everything to me.'

She holds the dress up to her breast as though she were a new bride.

SAQALLAH'S SWEETS

Jundi Street is a broad avenue that runs through the centre of Gaza City, its wide median a rare swathe of green space and fountains, mostly disused. Nevertheless, on a summer evening the atmosphere is festive: the street fills up with families out for a stroll, enjoying the breeze from the sea. Vendors move through the throngs hawking roasted peanuts or barad, a phosphorescent yellow slushie that is a local obsession. A crowd forms around Saqallah's Sweets.

Saqallah's is a landmark. The Saqallah family was already famous for its pastry shop back in Jaffa; soon after their flight from that city, they opened another one in Gaza City. Since then, they have expanded to several other locations around the Strip. Most are run by sons and grandsons of the original owner.

Their factory is a magical world in which sugar is spun into delicate clouds and dough rolled to transparent thinness, the air perfumed with buttery syrup and toasting nuts. Amid sacks of walnuts grown in Gaza and pistachios imported (through the tunnels) from California, employees make classic baklava of all kinds, as well as house inventions like bsees [semolina nests] and gleaming round trays of knafa arabiya [walnut pastry], Gaza's most characteristic dessert.

UM ZAHER

Um Zaher has a small house in a modest walled compound in Garara, in the central Gaza Strip. Several similar houses cluster around a dirt road; beyond

lie agricultural fields with tidy rows of aubergines and chilli peppers growing under the blazing summer sun. Inside the gate, a haven of green: figs and pomegranates, hibiscus and palms grow thick around the house. Chickens scratch in the shade of a grapevine. And there is Um Zaher: vital, energetic, commanding, overseeing every detail of her tiny domain with almost uncanny efficiency. Immediately after greeting us and while still making small talk, she hoists herself into the fig tree to pick burstingly sweet fruit to eat with our tea.

The kitchen is separate from the house, a little outbuilding with a shady entrance where Um Zaher sits to chop chard and onions for fogaiyya while she tells us about her youngest son, who has just graduated with honours from the university and is about to marry. In the tiny kitchen lined with plastic jars of homemade pickles and her prized hundred-and-fifty-year-old stone grain mill, passed down to her through the generations, she prepares several different meals at once: fatta for the workers who are helping rebuild a damaged room in her house, fogaiyya for us, bisara for a neighbour.

All of this with a sort of effortless coordination, while chatting about families and recipes. Nothing goes to waste: vegetable scraps are taken out to the chickens, coffee grounds fertilise a small bed of garden vegetables irrigated with grey water, lemon rinds are reused for scrubbing meat.

Has her diet changed since the siege? ‘No, people waste a lot, but there are rations and vouchers, and if you don’t mind buying frozen meat instead of fresh, there’s not that much difference.’ But then, this is Um Zaher, home economist *par excellence*, a no-nonsense person who refuses to so much as entertain notions of victimhood.

FOGAIYYA: *meat stew with chard*

In the damp chill of Gaza’s winters, rural people and their descendants crave the hearty, one-dish meals unique to the region.

Serves 5–6

500g lean stewing beef or boneless lamb, cut into 2cm pieces

400g tin of chickpeas, drained and rinsed
100g rice, rinsed
1 tsp salt
360g chard, trimmed and finely chopped
5 cloves garlic
2 tbsp olive oil
120ml lemon juice

Prepare the meat in a broth with onion, bay, cinnamon, allspice, cardamom, black peppercorns, cloves and rosemary in 1.5 litres of water, adding the chickpeas. Boil and then simmer, partially covered, for an hour or so. Strain out spices and set aside the broth, chickpeas and meat.

Combine the chickpeas, rice and half-teaspoon of salt in a clean pot with the broth and meat. Cook until the rice is tender. Add the chard, one handful at a time while stirring. Reduce heat and simmer until the stew thickens slightly.

Mash the garlic with the remaining salt. In a separate pan, fry the garlic in olive oil until lightly golden. Stir into the stew.

Finish by stirring in lemon juice. Serve in individual bowls. Garnish with lemon slices and chilli flakes.

From 2003 to 2007, US-Palestinian journalist and activist Laila El-Haddad was an Al Jazeera correspondent in Gaza. She began blogging about daily life in 2004, publishing her observations as Gaza Mom *(2010). She was TV chef Anthony Bourdain's guide in Gaza for the groundbreaking CNN show* Parts Unknown*, and, with Maggie Schmitt, co-authored* The Gaza Kitchen *(2013), from which these extracts are taken.*

Asil Yaghi

MY MOTHER WEPT TODAY

My mother wept today. It was a defeated, weary weeping. My mother, whose wonderful cook's hands everyone swears by, wept after burning the maqlubeh [a meat and rice dish], even though it wasn't her fault. We haven't been able to find the right cooking pot after being displaced for the fourth time to what is, supposedly, the final stop: Rafah.

The maqlubeh wasn't the only thing to burn today. First it was my heart. That morning I had seen a beautiful little boy, all dressed up, carrying a small pot to somewhere that looked like it was giving out food. And once he left that place crowded with people waving containers above their heads, I cried like I never had throughout this nightmare. I cried because on his way back, the boy was laughing. I cried because if I were him I would have broken down in tears. But he laughed as he described the scene: 'It's hopeless!'

Does that boy realise? Does he comprehend the meaning of 'hopeless' in a situation like this? How could he have left laughing? And why was he laughing at all?

Oh God…

My mother didn't weep because the maqlubeh hadn't worked out. She wept because we'd had to throw it in the bin. We all tried to reassure her that God understood what we were going through, that He had watched as we'd tried to eat it. No matter what we said, she carried on crying. I tried to calm her down, and then she got up, eyes brimming with tears, to lay out her prayer rug and cry to God, begging for His forgiveness. I am still in

shock that my mother, despite tasting the pain of losing her entire family, her dearest relatives, the ones closest to my heart and hers, wept for God's forgiveness because we had to throw food away.

Asil Yaghi is a writer and law graduate from Gaza. This piece is sourced from the website Passages Through Genocide.

Asmaa Mustafa

I DIDN’T FEEL SORRY FOR THE BOOKS

27 DECEMBER 2023

I have loved reading since I was a child, especially novels and detective fiction. In Year 9, I remember buying twenty-five books and standing them up nicely on a shelf in my small bedroom. I would save my pocket money to buy the books I loved. The following year, my tastes developed, and I bought twice as many books, sometimes reading the same one twice over. My collection grew and the number of bookshelves increased. By the time I completed my university studies, I owned a small library. Eventually I could call it a proper library. It held many types of books, from short stories, poetry collections and literary novels in Arabic and English, to books given to me by dear writer friends, scholarly works of learning and religious, scientific and historical volumes that I loved and that loved me. Cookbooks and studies of etiquette had pride of place in my library.

Then I was forced to leave them behind and move to the south of Gaza.

For the people in the north, where I lived with my family, the suffering grew intense. Eventually, they had no choice but to use the pages of books to light fires in order to cook whatever scraps of food they could gather for their children.

I didn’t feel sorry for the books. Books are cheap when set against the resilience of our people in the north, who are patient and grateful to God amid great suffering. We wish we could offer them help, but we are powerless in the face of their sacrifices and tortured by the impossibility of reaching them with medicine, food or water to sustain life. Aid agencies cannot help, but God is capable of everything.

Books used to ignite our thoughts. Now books feed our children.

O God, forgive their faults and ours, and reward their favours and ours. O God, feed them and keep them from hunger, and protect us all from fear.

31 JANUARY 2024

School was suspended on Saturday 7 October 2023, and we have yet to see the Sunday morning when we might resume classes.

I used to believe that learning happened in a systemised manner through the educational processes of schools, delivered by teachers in classrooms, as it has been in my modest sixteen years of experience in education, and according to the consensus among those working in education around the world. But with what is happening here in Gaza, I have changed my mind.

It’s very simple. Here, young and old alike learn at the School of War on Gaza. Here, every day, a thousand stories are told and lived, a thousand wounds bleed. In our deep trauma, war has forced over two million Gazan Palestinians to learn through experience what schools don’t teach and what could never be read in textbooks.

Here, we find young children specialising in political analysis. They listen to adults in the shelters. They place events in the context of the nation’s history. They predict what is coming and know how to endure. They discuss current affairs, as history repeats itself and calamities continue to befall this bereaved people. Life in the shelters has taught us patience. We have learned to manage our anger, to console others, to empathise with the poor and the unhoused, to face death. We have learned to bow our heads to no one but God. We have learned how to be free.

26 FEBRUARY 2024

Here in the south of Rafah, hundreds of thousands of tents have been erected, intended to shelter Palestinian families from the danger of the brutal occupation assault that has been taking place for more than four

months. People left their homes behind in uncertainty after enemy tanks entered their neighbourhoods. They escaped with their lives, after others were injured and martyred.

Judy is seven. She has a beautiful face, calm features and her hair is the colour of the sun. She comes every day at 4pm with her friends from the neighbouring tents, leaning on one of them for support. She comes to listen to the story that I will tell them and to discuss the lessons learned from the story. One day she might tell her own story. When that happens, everyone will listen closely to what she has to say.

Judy has had to come a long way. She aroused my curiosity, leaning on her friends, careful on her feet. Her left shoe was open, and she put one hand on that foot, which was covered with a carefully positioned cloth. Every time I asked a question, Judy raised her other hand to speak.

After the class, all the students went back to their tents, except for Judy and her friends, who helped her get up, taking care to check her foot. I saw her shaking her head as if she was reassuring her friends. She walked towards me, leaning on them again. I said she should sit, hugged her and asked where she had fled from.

Judy told me that she was from Gaza City. Her family's first displacement was to Nuseirat, in the middle of the Gaza Strip, with relatives. When the enemy launched a ground attack there with intense artillery shelling, it was the middle of the night, very cold, very dark. They ran out of the house, but her two sisters were killed in front of them all, and Judy's foot was injured. She did not feel pain at the time and just kept running, like everyone else around her. When the sun began to rise, Judy saw how much blood she had lost. 'I tore a piece of cloth from my clothes, wrapped it around my leg, tied it tightly and kept running,' she told me. When she heard the sound of an ambulance, she ran towards it by herself, but no one heard her voice, and she couldn't reach it. Because her injured foot slowed her down, she became separated from her family, but a woman helped her contact relatives to let them know she was still alive and needed medical care.

Eventually her father arrived. He wrapped his daughter in his arms and held her close, crying bitterly. He thought he had lost Judy as well. Now Judy, the survivor, has the rest of her life to tell her story and to give hope to everyone around her, with her gorgeous smile. Judy lost two of her sisters, but not her love for life. She did not lose her awareness of her fundamental right to live in safety and receive an education. She made new friends to lean on, whom she loves and who love her. She lost her little house, but not her dreams. She lost beautiful memories, but did not lose hope. She lost her toys, her books and her school bag. But she is absolutely certain that daybreak is near, and that this nightmare will end, and that she and her friends will one day go back to school.

Gaza-based English teacher Asmaa Ramadan Mustafa is part of the digital empowerment team at Palestine's Ministry of Education. She was named Global Teacher of the Year in the 2020 AKS Education Awards in India, and Innovative Teacher of Palestine for 2022. She wrote these posts for education journal Manhajiyat*, translated by Marwan Hassan, PhD.*

Shahd Elswerki

THE RED FLOWER

I was five years old and still in kindergarten when I realised for the very first time that I was taller and bigger than my peers.

We were preparing for our graduation ceremony from kindergarten. There were lots of kids and lots of noise – I could hear their joyful laughter and smell the sweat coming off them after dancing the dabke. I wanted to participate in it so badly but was excluded from the dance routine known as ‘The Flowers’, because I was taller than the other children.

I asked to at least sing – here I thought my height would not matter – but Miss Falak’s gloomy face said ‘No’ before her mouth said it.

I stood alone in the corner of the classroom, watching the girls dance and sing, ‘I am the yellow flower! I am the red flower!’ and I prayed, ‘Please God, let me in. Do anything to let me in.’

Students perform the traditional dance ‘dabke’ at a concert by the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, Gaza City, 2019.

The girls sang all the colours of the flowers: yellow, white, purple, red.

Oh, red! I have a beautiful red dress with white flowers that my grandmother bought me when I was sick after eating bad ice cream from Abu Farouk’s shop. I’d look great wearing it with my white shoes and my red hat … I was daydreaming when I accidentally heard Miss Falak ask the blonde girl acting as the red flower: ‘Do you have a red dress?’

The girl said no.

Miss Falak turned to the rest of us: ‘Girls, does any one of you have a red dress?’

I raised my hand till it touched the ceiling of the classroom and screamed: ‘I have one! I have a beautiful one! Can I go home and bring it, can I?’

The answer came: ‘Yes, go!’

I ran out into the narrow street leading from the kindergarten to my home. I was thinking, my mother is surely asleep, she'll be furious if I wake her up – but I need to, Mum, forgive me! I knocked on the metal door to our home. I knocked and knocked, but my mother was asleep. I shouted: 'Mum, please wake up, wake up and open the door!'

'Who is it?' came her angry voice.

'Me!'

'What do you want? Why are you back?'

'I want my red dress, please open the door.'

She opened the door with her eyes half-closed. Our ground-floor apartment was dark, but I managed to find the dress.

I ran back along the narrow street again, the red dress in my hands, singing: 'I am the red flower, I am the red flower!'

Shahd Elswerki works for the UNDP in Gaza as a communications assistant. She holds a BA in English and French literature from Al-Azhar University, Gaza, and loves to read and write short stories. This story dates from 2013.

Jehad Abu Salim

FROM FENCE TO FENCE

Summer days are long, but in Gaza they are longer than one might think. They get even longer when the electricity and the internet are shut off, which is most of the time. This had been my daytime nightmare ever since Israel imposed its siege on the Gaza Strip in 2007. To escape it, you could read or visit a friend to chat, but when the weather was hot and humid, the energy to do any of these activities would evaporate. On one such day, I went to the roof of my house out of boredom. Although this was not the first time I had looked at the landscape from my family's rooftop in Deir al-Balah, some thoughts and reflections made this day unforgettable. I looked east and there was the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, and I looked west and there was the sea. From one spot both borders were visible and, between them, the familiar scene of innumerable drab houses stretching towards both horizons.

At that moment I recalled one of the sayings used by Palestinians in Gaza to refer to the Strip: we're trapped *min al-silik ila al-silik* ('from the fence to the fence'). This simple phrase sums up Gaza's current reality: a fenced place, surrounded by dead ends and, within it, a caged human sea with almost no hope or future. Such thoughts never abandoned me. They chased me most of the time I spent in Gaza, where I observed how the Strip grew ever more overcrowded. Indeed, phrases such as 'urban population density', 'lack of space' and many other metaphors relating to overcrowded populations have become synonymous with Gaza. These descriptors have taken on a life of their own, straddling the line between disparate

nomenclatures. Ostensibly, they cast Gaza in terms of a hackneyed humanitarian discourse, referring to Gaza's deteriorating economic and social conditions. The significance of looking at Gaza's current state beyond such humanitarian frameworks cannot be overstated. As with most people who live in Gaza, my understanding of its reality could never be detached from politics and history. This is not the framework most commonly used to understand the Gaza Strip. Instead, humanitarian frameworks that use the language of crisis, aid and emergency dominate discourse on the Strip. Regardless of intent – and it should be noted that much of this discourse is well-meaning – humanitarianism has reshaped Gaza. Politics and history have been stripped away and what remains is a depoliticised rendition of life in the Strip.

This rendition has led to a number of problems. First and foremost, because the current Gaza Strip is a product of political history, humanitarian discourse contributes to normalising Gaza's current reality, transforming it into another case of hunger or poverty (albeit one without history) that the international community has to deal with through aid and expertise. Second, Gaza's current fate was not a result of natural pull factors that attracted almost 200,000 refugees between 1947 and 1950. On the contrary, the movement of large numbers of people was a direct result of the 1948 Zionist conquest of Palestine, the root cause of Palestinian refugees' plight. Therefore, it is crucial to refer to Gaza's current problems in light of the history of the Zionist settler-colonial project and the conflicts it generated. Third, and most importantly, the tendency to view Gaza's problem through a merely humanitarian lens, of employing scientific rhetoric without referring to the direct political factors that created the humanitarian crisis, deprives Palestinians of the Gaza Strip – both refugees and original residents – of their agency. It functions to silence their voices and undermine their individual and collective perception of the events that led to Gaza's current situation.

In lieu of historical contextualisation, an examination of Gazans' everyday sayings can help us reassert and uncover the historical and political roots of their oppression. It helps us understand them on their own

terms, an essential first step in superseding the humanitarian discourse that has so far been dominant. Although it is impossible to show how frequently a common saying is used, ‘from fence to fence’ does appear in articles published by the local press in the Gaza Strip. The phrase can be thought of as part of everyday politics. … I would argue that phrases, metaphors and expressions, although intangible, represent people’s positions towards social and political realities. They are not merely proverbs or part of a folkloric cultural repertoire: they make up a profoundly political statement.

‘From fence to fence’ reflects the geographic space Palestinians inhabit. For them, ‘the fence’ is the most pernicious manifestation of the Zionist conquest in 1948 and its continuity into the present. The fence is a physical barrier that was imposed by an external force which divides what the Palestinians in Gaza consider their historic land and which prevented them from returning to their original towns and villages. The fence is a constant reminder of the rupture caused by the 1948 war, which pushed many Palestinians out of their towns and villages in what is today the state of Israel. Even when some Gazans refer to the armistice line of 1949, the line that was drawn in the aftermath of the 1948 war, few people refer to it as a border. It is mostly referred to in Arabic as *al-silik* – literally, ‘the wire’ or ‘the fence’.

In short, for the Palestinians in Gaza, the fence evokes the Nakba, the refugee struggle and the occupation. The fence, as a physical barrier to refugee return, was the beginning of the tragedy. The fence today is its continuation. And since the fence caused the problem, the solution must include its removal. The fence is the history that Palestinians in Gaza never want to forget, and no amount of aid can induce them to do so.

Jehad Abu Salim is Executive Director of the Jerusalem Fund and Palestine Center in Washington DC. He was born in Deir al-Balah, graduated from Gaza’s Al-Azhar University, gained a diploma in Hebrew from the Islamic University of Gaza, and is completing his PhD at New York University on Arab perceptions of Zionism before 1948. This extract is from Gaza as Metaphor *(Hurst, 2016).*

Caitlin Procter

DAYTRIPPING BEFORE THE WAR

A ping on your phone. It’s Careem, the local ride-share app, telling you your taxi has arrived. Outside the entrance of your beachfront hotel in Gaza City, you hop into a yellow cab for your daytrip around some of Gaza’s tourist attractions.

Your driver takes you north, to the fields of Beit Lahia. Either side are ranged rows and rows of polytunnels full of strawberries, one of Gaza’s biggest exports. Nour Soboh, a young farmer, greets you for a short tour: her farm is a local attraction and Nour leads sessions for school groups, universities and visiting families on the importance of purchasing local produce.

Next comes a visit to the site of Mukheitim, a Byzantine church dating back to the fifth century. It was first uncovered in Jabalia by archaeologists in 1996, and both the church and adjacent monastery are being restored by teams of Palestinian, French and Spanish specialists, funded by the British Council. The site’s central area has been protected by a superb new roof, designed to protect its mosaics and Greek inscriptions from the sunlight. You follow a marked trail around the site, which is buzzing with archaeologists at work – including many students in training on this dig, who are keen to share the latest progress with you.

Returning through the outskirts of Gaza City, and just around the corner from al-Shifa Hospital, you drop into Shababeek, Gaza’s first contemporary art gallery, established in 2009 by artists Majed Shala, Basel El Maqusi and Sherif Serhan. Having moved around several locations, Shababeek

eventually found its home in this large building with its different exhibition spaces. One floor is given over to painters' studios, and a loft has been converted into a sculpture workshop. Shababeek has come to be one of the most important art spaces in all of Palestine.

Moving towards the oldest part of Gaza City, you pass through packed streets and busy markets. Many of the buildings here are painted; there are murals and street art wherever you look. In the heart of the old town, in the Daraj neighbourhood, you reach the Great Omari Mosque. This mighty building with its basilica-style architecture stands over what remained of the Cathedral of St John the Baptist, built on the same site by the Crusaders in 1149 and mostly destroyed by the Muslim leader Salah al-Din in 1187. It is famous for its spectacular columns and inscriptions, and is impressive in size.

Nearby stands Hammam al-Samara, Gaza's only remaining traditional public bathhouse. It features a domed roof adorned with round openings set with coloured glass, and an exquisite marble floor. The hammam constitutes an important part of the architectural fabric of the Old City, alongside the Qaysariyah Market, known as the Gold Market for its proliferation of jewellery shops, which dates from the Mamluk era. Close by in the Zeitoun neighbourhood stands the Orthodox church of St Porphyrius, which dates from 407 CE and is thought to be the third oldest church in the world. It is much loved for its vibrant blue interior and intricate iconography.

Zawiya market, Gaza City, 2023.

With a little time to spare, Gaza City has an abundance of libraries to lose yourself in. On Palestine Square there's the central library in the municipality building, dating from 1904, repository of Gaza's archives; or you could aim for the Diana Mari Sabagh Library, housing twenty thousand books as an integral part of the Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Centre. The centre itself was founded in 1985 as the first purpose-built cultural centre in Palestine, and was nominated for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for its innovative triangular plan and interior spaces.

Your journey continues southwards out of Gaza City, heading into the Nuseirat refugee camp to visit a cooperative that specialises in the Palestinian art of tatreez, a cross-stich embroidery technique that is more than three thousand years old. In its original form, tatreez was inspired by the landscape: Gaza's traditional designs are known for the motif of the cypress tree, often combined with other trees, both upright and upside down. Tatreez is an ancient art form steeped in symbolism, and embroidery

cooperatives throughout Gaza have become an important source of income generation for women.

Continuing south towards Tell Umm el-Amr, close to the city of Deir al-Balah, you stop next at the ancient site of the Christian monastery of St Hilarion, one of the largest such foundations in the Middle East. The earliest building here dates back to the fourth century and is attributed to Hilarion, known as the father of Palestinian monasticism. It was abandoned after an earthquake in the seventh century. After its rediscovery in 1999, a team of Palestinian and French archaeologists worked to excavate the site. Professor Ayman Hassouna, who teaches history and archaeology at Gaza's Islamic University, has worked tirelessly to enable young archaeologists to build their careers working on this site. Architecturally it is very rare, described by UNESCO as holding exceptional historical, religious and cultural heritage. Here, as at the excavations in Jabalia, you take the chance to discuss progress on the dig with archaeologists working onsite.

Nearby, you detour to the main al-Khidr Mosque in Deir al-Balah, part of which was converted into a striking children's library in 2016. Run by the NAWA Association, a local cultural NGO under its formidable director Reem Abu Jaber, the library has a busy schedule of creative arts and drama activities for children. The entire space is packed from the floors to the domed ceilings with books, and the external walls are decorated with beautiful mosaics, designed by children from the surrounding communities.

Proceeding south to the city of Khan Yunis, you visit the remains of Qalaat Barquq, a fort built by the Mamluk sultan Barquq in 1387. Only the west façade, the dome of the fort's mosque and part of the minaret still stand, towering over the city. Further south still, take time for the Rafah Museum: after thirty years of planning, the museum opened at the end of 2022 as a centre for promoting and maintaining Palestinian heritage in Gaza, under the leadership of Professor Suhayla Shahin.

From Rafah you turn back north, taking the coast road towards Gaza City in time to enjoy the sun setting spectacularly into the Mediterranean – and to stop off at the al-Sawaf carpet shop. The owner Mahmood al-Sawaf, now in his late seventies, inherited the trade of carpet-weaving, which has

been passed down through his family for hundreds of years. His shop is small but packed full of rugs – a real test for the indecisive, who must choose from an array of patterns and colours.

Before dinner, the al-Jaru music shop is worth a visit. Raji al-Jaru is a founding member of Osprey, Gaza's most successful rock band, and is also Gaza's lead importer of musical instruments. You may come across musicians jamming in the lofty space upstairs – and, if you play yourself, you could find yourself invited to join in.

Delivered back to your hotel, there's time to freshen up before you head out for dinner at one of Gaza City's Abu Hassira restaurants. A longstanding family of fishers, the Abu Hassiras have been feeding Gazans for decades. Their menus are renowned for zibdiyit, a fiery shrimp and tomato tajine-style stew seasoned with sesame and dill.

Prayers at the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza, 2003.

Note by Caitlin Procter

This is an imaginary trip that could have been made before 7 October 2023 by those already inside the Gaza Strip or fortunate enough to be able to secure Israeli permission to enter – primarily humanitarian workers and journalists. Despite years of blockade and decades of military occupation and displacement, Palestinians have dedicated their lives to preserving and maintaining Gaza's rich historical and contemporary cultural heritage, and to educating future generations in its value. Yet, as one young woman told me in Gaza in 2018: 'We feel like hostages all the time, waiting for someone else to decide what our fate will be.'

Since October 2023, Israel has systematically attacked Gaza's cultural properties. All the places in this itinerary have been severely damaged or destroyed. The idea of eradicating culture in Gaza is part of a long-standing pattern of cultural destruction throughout historic Palestine, feeding the logic of settler colonialism to eliminate every aspect of a people and their identity from the land and leaving Palestine in a state of what the scholar Daud Abdullah has called 'cultural bareness'. Gaza's historic and contemporary cultural heritage – what now remains of it – is uniquely vulnerable. Its preservation demands global intervention.

Political anthropologist Caitlin Procter has written widely on migration issues in Gaza. She has consulted for UNRWA, UNHCR, UNICEF and other agencies, and teaches at the European University Institute in Florence. She is working with Palestinian heritage experts preparing The Gaza Guidebook, *a large-format work documenting Gaza's cultural sites with essays on intellectual history. She contributed this piece, adapted from a version in* Jacobin, *in April 2024.*

PHOTO KOKO / PHOTO KEGHAM / PHOTO HRANT

As the final paragraph of an essay for the *London Review of Books*, the British Palestinian novelist Selma Dabbagh wrote in February 2024:

> At the end of last month I went to an event at the Photographers' Gallery, where the grandson (and namesake) of the Armenian Gazan photographer Kegham Djeghalian (1915–81) took us through what is left of the archive of Studio Kegham. For many years the studio photographed the lives of the people of Gaza: girls laughing at the beach in 1950s dresses, dances, picnics, Sadat on an official visit, children holding hands beside the sea, group photos of builders, nurses, demonstrators and students on the Mediterranean over the years. Djeghalian's work also includes the iconic photographs of tents after the Nakba of 1948. The lion's share of the archive was inherited by Marwan Tarazi, a colleague of Djeghalian's. Digital records remained in Gaza, in homes understood to have been destroyed. Tarazi was killed together with his wife in the bombing of the St Porphyrius Church on 20 October 2023. It is believed that most of the archive and memory of Studio Kegham went with him.

Dabbagh's brief report was an intriguing thread. I pulled at it a little, in the few weeks available to me for the writing of this book. I quickly found myself piecing together a sprawling and entirely unexpected multi-generational saga that binds Gaza into the history and destiny of several large families now spread around the globe. Their story, which spans three genocides, has to my knowledge only ever been written before in fragments. I have tried to join those fragments here, but there is much I

have had to omit from this telling – and even more that I don't know. I hope that what follows might serve as a foundation upon which others can build.

Mention the name Levon Yotnakhparian in certain circles and there will be a wave of oohs and aahs, murmurs, intakes of breath and admiring nods of the head. More than half a century after his death, Yotnakhparian is acclaimed as a national hero, the personal saviour of thousands during a ruthless and appalling genocide and a worldwide preserver of the language, identity and culture of millions more.

The nation, the genocide and the admirers are Armenian.

Levon was born in 1887 into a prosperous Armenian family in the already-ancient city of Urfa, located in what is now southeastern Turkey close to Syria. The family name,* which translates as 'Of the family of seven brothers', originated a century or so before: Levon's great-grandfather Arakel – known then as Dermenjian (a *dermenji* is a miller) – had seven sons, and each of them had seven children, both boys and girls. The pattern eventually melded itself to the family identity, subsuming the old name. Levon's father was one of seven, and even Levon himself had six siblings.

But trouble loomed. Starting in April 1915, the group of broadly nationalist political reformers known as the Young Turks, who had seized power in Constantinople a few years before, began implementing their genocidal plan to exterminate the entire Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. From then until 1923, as many as 1.5 million people were killed, many on forced death marches en masse into the Syrian desert. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were deported or, as children, forcibly converted to Islam and integrated into Muslim families.

Levon's cousin Megerditch – one of, yes, seven siblings – led the local armed resistance to Turkish forces in Urfa, losing his life in a failed defence of the city. By then Levon, a master tailor who had enlisted in the Ottoman

Army years before, could see the writing on the wall. Early in 1915 he escaped from his unit in Damascus and joined a band of Armenian dissidents in southern Syria, disguised as a Kurd. Over the next five years, protected by Syrian Druze revolutionary leaders and Bedouin Arab insurgents working alongside the British in Transjordan, and supported by Armenian networks headquartered in Cairo, Levon Yotnakhparian co-ordinated a vast rescue effort. This saved the lives of at least four thousand Armenian refugees, while also identifying and repatriating thousands of bereaved or orphaned Armenian children. He crossed and re-crossed the desert, fending off bandits, commandeering trains, being feted by kings, archbishops and his own traumatised community for unparalleled grit and resourcefulness.

By 1920, settled in Damascus but facing the prospect of more war, this time against the French, Levon whisked his new bride Vartouhi away to the relative safety of Palestine. In Haifa, it seems he caught wind of how his old backers the British were busy turning the desert township of Beersheba – scene of their decisive victory over the Turks a few years before – into an administrative centre, including laying a new rail line to Rafah. Levon moved first to Beersheba, setting up a canteen serving food to British troops, and then in 1927 he, Vartouhi and their three young children followed the railway to Gaza, where the war hero returned to his trade as a tailor.

He stayed to the end of his life.

The first photograph of Palestine was made in Jerusalem in 1839, the same year the photographic process was invented. Although across the Middle East the earliest – and, then, the most prominent – exponents of the new science were visitors, photography’s development in the region is inextricably linked with the local Armenian minority. The pioneer in Palestine was Essayi (or Issay) Garabedian, who set up a studio and

workshop in Jerusalem in 1857, and coached many of the region's ground-breaking homegrown photographers. His protégé Garabed Krikorian opened his own studio in 1885, and one of Krikorian's students was Khalil Raad, Palestine's first Arab photographer. By the 1930s, cities around Palestine had dozens of photographic studios competing for business.

It seems that, at some point after arriving in Gaza, Levon Yotnakhparian diversified from tailoring into photography. By the late 1930s or early 1940s, he was taking portraits of British soldiers seeking a memento to send home to their families. His son Peniamin, born in Beersheba in 1925, recalled standing on a box beside his father as he worked, while Peniamin's three sisters, Araxi, Arpineh and Azniv, would hand-colour the resulting black-and-white prints as part of the service. The business quickly became known as 'Abu Benjamin's'.* But it was Levon's younger son Krikor, born in Gaza in 1928, who took over as a teenager in around 1943. 'Koko', as Krikor was nicknamed, became one of the pillars of Gaza society, photographing dignitaries and well-to-do families, and Photo Koko became one of the best-known Armenian-run photographic studios that operated in Gaza for decades in the mid-twentieth century.

Levon Yotnakhparian (front l.) with his wife Vartouhi (front r.), and their children (standing l. to r.) Krikor, Arpineh, Peniamin, Azniv, Araxi, in the courtyard of their home in Gaza, c.1939–40.

Araxi Yotnakhparian, Gaza, 1950s.

Levon Yotnakhparian junior, Krikor's son and grandson of the war hero Levon, now lives in California. He grew up in Gaza and remembers Photo Koko, located on the old post office street in the city centre, beside the jewellery market and money changers, 'where my dad Krikor used to encourage me to take pictures and develop prints. It was a great life experience that stayed with me until now. One of the fascinating things was the glass negatives, which were only used up until about the 1920s: I used to rearrange them in the shop to make more space, which tells me that they must have been taken during my grandfather's era.' What happened to them – and everything else from the shop – after Krikor's death in 1991 and the subsequent destruction is not known, but it must be assumed that all has been lost.

While Krikor stayed in Gaza, his brother Peniamin Yotnakhparian left after the Nakba, first to Lebanon and then the United States, along the way adapting his name to Benjamin Parian. His son – also named Levon – born in Beirut in 1955, now lives not far from his namesake cousin in California. He offers tantalising memories of meeting their illustrious forebear. 'I was nine years old. My grandfather [then aged seventy-seven] was walking with a cane, and hunched a bit. From what I remember he did not tell many stories about his adventures, but I do remember him telling me "I am Levon and you are Levon" – and I remember food that my grandmother made, telling us that my father [Benjamin] loved scrambled eggs with *sujuk*, a kind of dried sausage with tons of garlic.'

Benjamin takes up the story. 'When my father decided to record his memoirs, he felt that it had to be written in Armenian. He dictated them to my mother [Vartouhi], who wrote them down in a set of notebooks. Later he showed the notebooks to the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, who told him they were part of Armenian history and should be published.' But it was not to be. The elder Levon Yotnakhparian, hero of the Armenian nation, died in Gaza in 1970 at the age of eighty-three. According to

Benjamin’s account, his wife Vartouhi ‘followed him within two months. She died peacefully in her bed.’ They were laid to rest in the cemetery beside Gaza’s Greek Orthodox church of St Porphyrius that was hit by an Israeli airstrike in October 2023.

Nevertheless, Vartouhi’s hand-written notebooks have survived, in the care of Krikor Yotnakhparian’s family – and in 2012, Levon Parian finally published his grandfather’s memoir in English translation as *Crows of the Desert*. It’s a unique book, full of vivid storytelling and reproductions of original documents. Photographs show Levon senior’s work rehabilitating genocide survivors, interspersed with characteristically professional portraits of the family smiling in the courtyard of their home in Gaza, shortly before the Nakba.

A few steps from Photo Koko on Omar al-Mukhtar Street – the main drag that ran, and still runs, through the heart of Gaza City – stood Photo Kegham, another pioneering Armenian studio with a story to tell. Papers belonging to its owner, Kegham Djeghalian, state that he was born in Turkey in 1915, just as the massacres of Armenians were beginning, but their accuracy is doubtful. With most of his family killed, he was spirited away as an infant to Syria by his mother – or, in some tellings, his mother fled while pregnant and he was born when she reached Aleppo – but tragically she did not survive. The boy grew up in a Lebanese orphanage before striking out to seek his fortune in Palestine.

Photo Kegham, Gaza, c.1958, showing Kegham Djeghalian (third from r.) and his assistant Maurice Tarazi (fifth from r.).

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Jerusalem was a large, vibrant capital city with a deeply rooted Armenian history. But it already had dozens or hundreds of well-established Armenian businesses, and was facing deepening political turmoil. Restless and ambitious, Kegham may have felt that opportunity knocked more loudly elsewhere. He left for the Mediterranean port city of Jaffa, down on the coast, and within a few years had networked widely in Jaffa's own burgeoning Armenian community, trained himself up in photography and found himself a bride – Zevart Nakashian, aged only nineteen, sister of the photographer Hrant (whom we will meet later in this story). They married in 1944 and immediately struck out for pastures new, settling in Gaza where Kegham set up his own photo business. The following year, their daughter Anahid was born.

A Gaza countryside picnic, c.1960, by Kegham Djeghalian, showing local bank director Adnan El Alamy (front r.) eating qidreh with Kegham's wife Zevart (back l., drinking), son Avedis (centre) and daughter Anahid (back r.), with relatives.

'Gaza was a beautiful society, very well-educated people,' says Anahid, now in her late seventies, on a video call from her home in France. 'They welcomed us. I went to Arabic-speaking school, but we spoke Armenian at home and every Thursday afternoon my mother taught us to read and write in Armenian. She spoke French and a little English when she arrived but slowly learned Arabic from Nadera, the nanny – and in return my mother

taught Nadera to pray in Armenian, and of course they knew God would accept Nadera's prayers. That's how it was.'

Anahid paints a cloudless picture of her adolescence in the 1950s and '60s, when Gaza was under Egyptian control, from picnics and beach excursions to watching ladies dancing the tango and the waltz at society tea dances, and even following her mother on shopping trips to Cairo, the only land border open at the time. 'Several summers,' she says, 'we went to Lebanon all together' to meet her mother's family, which was spread between Armenian diaspora communities in Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus and Amman.

Meanwhile, her father Kegham's business was taking off. Studio work was his bread and butter, but he also became the local agent for international camera companies and began roaming Gaza, photographing daily life at all levels of society, spanning the end of the British Mandate and the period of Egyptian control. He photographed politicians, family picnics, days out at the beach, visiting dignitaries such as Che Guevara in 1959 and the Hollywood actor Yul Brynner on a United Nations mission in 1961, the misery of Gaza's refugee camps, the brief but violent Israeli occupation of 1956–57, and more. 'He was not a photojournalist. He just had this urge to document everything,' Kegham's grandson (and Anahid's nephew) – also named Kegham Djeghalian – has said.

It even transpired that Kegham senior adopted the Palestinian cause and worked with Egyptian intelligence before 1967 to smuggle photographic negatives from the West Bank to Gaza, and on to Cairo. In response, locals dubbed him *al-Musawer al-Fedai*, the Guerrilla Photographer, while Anahid recalls that he was also known as Abu Bishara, because Gazans translated her brother's name Avedis – Armenian for the 'good news' or gospel of Christ – into its Arabic equivalent, Bishara. Throughout his career 'Abu Bishara' was known for mentoring many aspiring young photographic assistants, including Maurice Tarazi, who started at Photo Kegham at the age of fourteen and stayed all his life. 'Photography was an important means of communication,' Anahid notes. 'People had pictures taken to be

sent to their families as a visual record – personal portraits, but also events, weddings, all of that.'

In 1975, aged only fifty, Zevart was taken ill and rushed to hospital in Jerusalem, where she died. Kegham soldiered on alone in Gaza, but his health was also poor, and he eventually succumbed in 1981. Photo Kegham passed to Maurice Tarazi, who kept the studio open with his brother Marwan until Gaza's economic and social conditions forced closure in the 2000s. After Maurice's death, Marwan took over the studio's unique archive, comprising nine boxes of negatives, prints and documents stored at his home in Gaza City. But in October 2023 Israel began bombarding the neighbourhood. The family was forced to flee to Gaza's St Porphyrius Church, where Marwan, his wife Nahed and six-month-old granddaughter Joelle were among eighteen people killed by an Israeli airstrike on 19 October. Their son Sami survived, but at the time of writing his whereabouts or safety are unclear, and it is not known whether any of the Photo Kegham archive in Gaza is salvageable. It was not digitised.

Some years before, Kegham junior, who had grown up with stories of his grandfather's fame, began tracing unacknowledged Photo Kegham images online and in old postcards. In 2018, his father Avedis – the Bishara of 'Abu Bishara' – showed him three long-ignored boxes of Photo Kegham's archive that had made their way to the family home in Cairo. After digitising and analysing their contents, Kegham – a visual artist who teaches image and fashion at the German International University in Cairo – created an exhibition that showcases his grandfather's skill in capturing Gaza life in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. It has toured internationally and has, inevitably at a time of genocide, attracted the attention of both media and academia.

Acrobatics at the UN-and Quaker-run Nuseirat refugee camp boys' school, by Kegham Djeghalian, c.1949–53, showing the flag of the pre-revolutionary Kingdom of Egypt (top centre).

'[Gaza] is a city that has been under-documented,' the younger Kegham has said. 'It's not Jerusalem. It's not Bethlehem. Those cities had plenty of photographers.' That dearth has caused perceptions of Gaza and its people to be dominated by colonial perspectives. 'What struck me most is how unsettling it is, psychologically, looking at these images and connecting them to the mental image of Gaza today. … [My grandfather has become] a motif of Gaza. You read Gaza through reading this foreigner, Kegham.'

Yet Kegham seems not to have seen himself as foreign. As his grandson has said: 'These photos raise more questions than they answer, for me. I look at them and wonder why an Armenian immigrant decided to settle in Gaza and not in Jerusalem. I wonder how a man who barely spoke Arabic earned such a high level of trust and love from people. My grandfather enrolled his children in Arabic-speaking schools where they also learned

about the Islamic religion and the Qur’an. He never had a problem with that, despite being a Christian. He loved and belonged to Gaza and its people.’

Physical archives are not the only parts of Gaza’s history that are unsalvageable. Anahid looks away from her laptop camera to reflect tearfully on her ‘soul sisters’ – four friends, all born in the mid-to-late 1940s in Gaza, who grew up together and stayed in touch all their lives: herself, Rawya Shawa, Dayya Shafi and Shakeh Atikian.

‘When we were teens, we would have parties and dance together,’ says Anahid, remembering how she was forced to move away at eighteen to study in Cairo, since Gaza at that time had no universities. The friends reunited in the 1970s but, after multiple get-togethers over decades, Anahid tells me she has been unable since 2001 to secure a visa to revisit the city of her birth. Now two of the four are gone. Rawya, a journalist and politician, died in Gaza in 2017. Dayya was killed in her home in Gaza in February 2024 with her daughter Rasha by an Israeli sniper. The two who are left may never see Gaza again: Anahid long ago settled in France, Shakeh in Canada. But they still talk almost every day, she says, even just to remind each other how to cook maqlubeh.

Saro Nakashian tells a good story about the early days of photography in Gaza, when the three exponents of the art – all Armenian, interrelated by marriage, nominally competing, but at heart close friends – would settle down in the cool evenings after work together to play cards and share gossip. At one time, he says over video link from Jerusalem, the three decided to form a cartel. After some discussion, they set a flat price of six passport-sized photos for two *qurush* (piastres) – roughly fifty US cents today. They shook on it, clapped each other on the back and went back to their game.

Not long after, a small boy came to Saro's father with a receipt in his hand, ready to collect the photos his parents had ordered. 'But the paper the boy was holding came from one of the other studios,' says Saro. 'And the amount written on it clearly showed one-and-a-half *qurush*, not two. So, my dad takes the paper and says to the boy that the photos aren't ready yet and he should come back tomorrow. That night, after work, the cartel met up as usual, and my dad nonchalantly asks how the others think the price-fixing policy is working out. They glance around and nod – and then my dad shows his friends the paper. The culprit is horrified! "We did this family a favour – and then they come to *you*?" he says.'

Saro roars with laughter, while forbidding me to reveal names.

Loquacious and engaging, Saro has lived most of his life alongside the Armenian Cathedral of St James at the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem. But he was born in Gaza and grew up there until 1968. His father, Hrant Nakashian, was perhaps the most successful of Gaza's trio of pioneering Armenian photographers, becoming a photographer for the United Nations in Gaza, publishing in high-profile magazines and exhibiting internationally.

Yet Hrant's beginnings, too, were overshadowed by genocide. In 1915, as the killings came closer to the family home in Gemerek, a village southwest of what is now Sivas in central Turkey, the family was torn apart: Hrant's father took up arms, while his wife fled with the two children to Lebanon for safety.

Hrant Nakashian with his son Saro, Gaza, 1963.

It was several years before they were able to reunite, and Hrant was born in Gemerek in 1921, with three more sisters. His father died soon after, and Hrant's mother returned to Lebanon with her six children. The family's community service, using their harvests of wheat and corn to keep orphaned survivors fed, meant that Hrant and two of his sisters were supported through their education at the prestigious Melkonian college in Cyprus with the help of Armenian philanthropic networks.

Another young graduate on the lookout for opportunity, Hrant arrived with his sisters in Jaffa in 1942. Within a short time, he had launched a photo business, Studio Venus, with a partner, competing for a while with his own brother Soukias, who ran a separate studio. It was a tight-knit community, and it's not too fanciful to imagine Hrant and Kegham

Djeghalian, both Armenian newcomers in the dynamic economy of pre-Nakba Jaffa, putting their heads together to work out how to make it in the photography business. The two certainly knew each other: in 1944, Hrant's sister Zevart became Kegham's wife.

When in 1948 the Nakba turned everything upside down and his relatives fled to Jordan, Hrant got a message from his brother-in-law. Come to Gaza, Kegham urged. There's plenty of work in photography. Hrant made the move, working together with Kegham in Gaza for a few years before branching out alone to establish Studio Hrant.

'We all lived on Omar al-Mukhtar, the main street in downtown Gaza,' remembers Hrant's son Saro, born later, in 1960. 'Our house had shops on the street level, then on two floors above were two apartments with five rooms and a huge roof area. Kegham was a hundred metres further along, on the upper floor – a big house with four bedrooms and the roof. From our balconies we could see the grand mosque of Gaza. Behind us were the Catholic church and the Greek church, and to our left was the Baptist Hospital, where I was born. Kegham's studio was always right there, a few metres from his home, but in the 1950s my father moved his studio to al-Rimal – a much bigger place with two shops in a new building and his studio up above.'

A boy in a school at al-Shati Camp, Gaza, by Hrant Nakashian, 1940s–50s.

It was a canny move. Hrant’s new studio lay across from a United Nations office that in 1957 became the headquarters of the UN Emergency Force, created the previous year to end the Suez Crisis and facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli troops. Already a photographer for UNRWA, the agency supporting Palestine refugees, Hrant photographed for UNEF as well, quickly earning a reputation for rare stylistic clarity, creating a compassionate photojournalism that sought to highlight his subjects’ humanity.

‘He was so well-known in all the refugee camps of Gaza,’ says Saro. ‘When he walked around with his camera, nobody stopped him – they all knew him, he was one of the people. That’s why he got such natural photographs, because people trusted him.’

Hrant’s photographs remain a key visual source for the Nakba from a Palestinian perspective, as well as the subsequent hardship suffered by people in Gaza. They are ‘very important and very famous as a record of the early days of the Nakba’, says Amani Shaltout, UNRWA’s archivist in Gaza. Hrant’s work was championed in particular by Haroun Hashim al-Rashid, a Gaza-born writer and journalist who later represented Palestine at the Arab League. Al-Rashid facilitated exhibitions for Hrant in Gaza, Cairo and Kuwait, helping propel him to international attention. Magazine work followed, and a display of Hrant’s photos was mounted at UN headquarters in New York.

‘I have a photograph of me and my father,’ says Saro. ‘I’m around three years old and he is working with his photographs, but is looking at me. I have it in my living room. He always encouraged me, gave me the camera, showed me how it worked, let me into the darkroom with him. I cherish Gaza. Every time I went back, I would have this nostalgic feeling of family, the days we had there. It was a place of culture. There were three movie houses we would go to, parks, lots of sporting activity, scouting, people playing volleyball. It had fields for fruit trees, especially citrus, where there would be these huge pools where farmers would store water from winter to use in summer. Those were our swimming pools. We had a great time.

‘We lived right on the main street in Gaza City, and our house had an entrance, then a staircase going up, then a right turn, then another staircase going to the upper floor. During the 1967 war, I remember we were hiding on that staircase, ten of us crammed into the corner between floors, so we were not facing windows. There was a lot of shooting. The cat was jumping about and got a bullet and died. My dad was with us, and I remember my aunt telling him to move a little to the left to stay out of the way – so he did, and then a bullet came up the stairs and hit exactly where he had been.

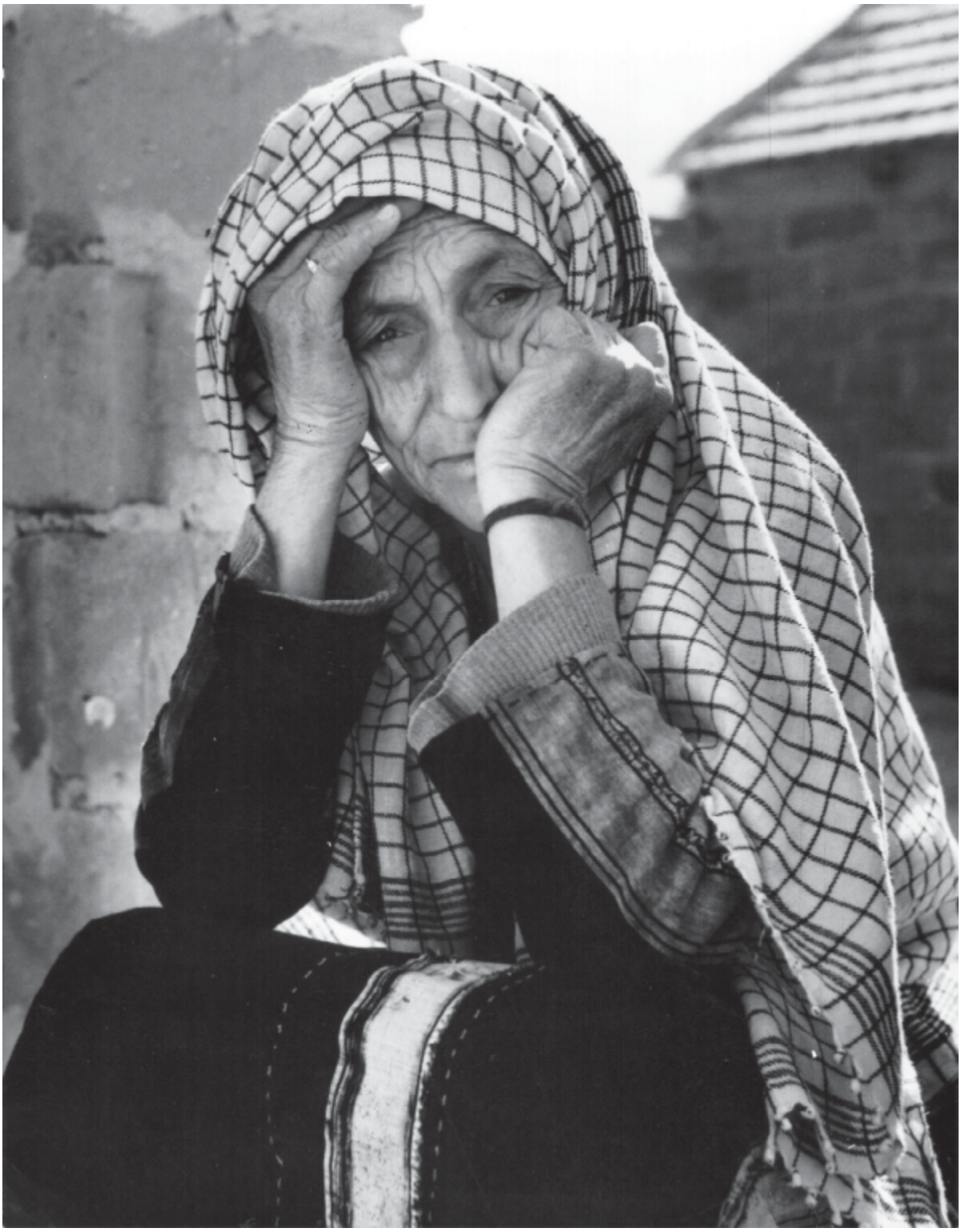
Every day for the rest of the time we lived there, I would look at that bullet hole in the wall.'

After 1967, Hrant moved his family away, setting up home in the Armenian convent in Jerusalem and abandoning photography to teach Armenian literature. But he stayed in touch and, when Kegham was made a widower in 1975, he would drive from Jerusalem with his teenage son Saro – it took just over an hour – to sit with his brother-in-law and eat fish together by the seashore. After many years writing and teaching, Hrant died in Jerusalem in 1991.

Unlike those of his compatriots in Gaza, whose archives are damaged or destroyed, Hrant's photographic legacy seems largely secure. His pre-Nakba work from Jaffa seems to have been lost. But several post-1948 images now form part of digitised collections preserved by the UN, and Saro tells me he has also kept all 130 of the large exhibition prints made for his father's international shows in the 1960s.

They, like the work of Kegham Djeghalian and Krikor Yotnakhparian, and perhaps also that of other photographers whose stories are still to be told, hold the mid-twentieth-century history of Gaza in transition.

Two boys in al-Shati Camp, Gaza, by Hrant Nakashian, 1940s–50s.



Portrait of a Palestimian woman al-Shati Camp, Gaza, by Hrant Nakashian, 1940s–50s.

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* Also spelled in English as Yotneghbaryan, Yotnakhberian, Yotnaghpairian and so on.

* In Arabic, parents are often known by the name of their eldest child prefixed by Abu (‘father of’) or Umm (‘mother of’).

Amir Qudaih

THEY NEVER BROKE ME

I was born into farming. My dad is a ‘tough love’ person. He wanted us to work the land. We had to go out to the farm every single day, at least once. I was working from the age of six.

I’m the youngest of three brothers; my sister came after me. We live in a unique village, Khuzaa. Even in Gaza it’s not well known. It’s the farthest out, right beside the border in the southeast of the Strip. Almost all the people in Khuzaa are cousins from the same family, and we’ve all grown up in the same place as farmers. We love the land – and I love the history of my family, though now it’s really hard to find any documents, because of all the wars we have been facing. Israel sprays herbicide to damage crops. Israel has bulldozed our olive trees. Israel flattened our greenhouse in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2023. Everything has been destroyed so many times. There are no birth certificates any more, no land deeds, nothing. It’s all resting on the stories I heard.

My father would tell me that Khuzaa was always very small, only a few houses. When he was young, people would farm all winter and then move in summer to Jaffa to trade. My childhood was a mix of going to school and being on the farm. On Fridays, when there was no school, we’d have to be up at 6am to work. My dad was strict. For a time, we grew tomatoes for extra income – date palms take years to grow, like olive and orange trees. Tomato plants grow quickly, but they are soft and break easily. If I broke one, it was a big deal for my dad. We had to be very careful.

That was part of the family's heritage, taking care of the land, going out to sit with the trees. Communicating. That connection helped us to see the land and the farm as part of us. We inherited it and we have to keep it happy, work it, let it lie fallow. We're never going to sell the land. Quite the opposite: my mother sold her gold jewellery to buy an irrigation system.

In 2010, someone donated land in Khuzaa to build a high school. It was very close to the border fence, less than five hundred metres away. Every single morning, as we were walking to school, Israeli snipers would shoot randomly into the village. They were trying to stop the adults going out to farm, but of course bullets would hit the school too. In the time I was there, three students were killed – a girl was shot dead inside the school, two others were killed while they were walking. Another girl was killed on her balcony at home one morning. Here in America, they often cancel school because of shootings. In Khuzaa, they never cancelled. We didn't realise at the time how abnormal the situation was.

That was a part of growing up there. We were completely cut off from the rest of the world. I never went outside the village in my thoughts. My hopes and dreams for my life were about having a nice farm. We didn't know anything about Gaza City, for instance. We never went there. We were happy in our community. And there were lots of things we did in the village that would have been impossible in the city. Girls were very safe: they would ride bikes, go out in the evening, because in Khuzaa everybody was looking out for them.

I never left home even for college. I would commute to and from the university in Gaza City, an hour each way. I studied civil engineering, but I also learned German. My older brother was one of the highest-rated students in the whole Gaza Strip, and won a scholarship to Germany. I taught myself English from music. I used to write down Eminem lyrics and try to memorise them.

Internet came into the house in 2012. That's when things started to change. We had watched movies and read books, but now we were online, talking to people on Facebook. I would post in Facebook groups with people from all over the world asking me what life in Gaza was like, how

we lived. There was this one American family from Boston. I would tell them what we're going through, try to educate them.

Then, in 2014, Israel completely destroyed Khuzaa. The village was wiped out. During the attack I was trapped with my family for twenty-one days in one small room inside the house. All we had to eat were watermelons. We never imagined watermelons would save our lives. When we got out, amid all the rubble and destruction, a family friend who worked with CNN – he was married to one of my cousins – knew I spoke English and told me the CNN bureau in Gaza City needed a translator. Having a job was, well, beyond my dreams. After work each day, the CNN team would go to their hotel, but their driver, who was Palestinian, and I slept in the office because we had nowhere else to go.

After the war finished, I posted pictures on the Facebook group and people wanted to learn more. That same American family were asking me how they could help, so I mentioned about completing my education. They made all these applications for me, and I was accepted to three different universities.

The real struggle was getting to the US Consulate for my visa interview. I applied to the Israelis for permission to travel from Gaza to Jerusalem, but they continually rejected me. For two years, I applied every month. Each time I had to pay a fee – my American family helped with that, and they also wrote to all these high-profile figures. They got a letter of support from the Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, and the Jimmy Carter Center, and CNN gave me a letter. That made it all seem powerful for the Israelis. I was called in by Israeli intelligence – that was scary, the first time I met Israelis face to face, other than when they were shooting at me. But still I was refused, until eventually, sometime later, they said yes. I had permission to leave Gaza for eight hours, to travel to Jerusalem for the interview and return immediately.

But part of my US paperwork had expired – and the day I was allowed to travel was not my interview day. Nevertheless, I had no choice. This was the golden ticket. I spent a couple of days hiding in Jerusalem, then moved to Ramallah to stay with relatives. It took about a month to renew my US

paperwork, and then my interview date was coming up. The main road from Ramallah is blocked with checkpoints: if the Israelis caught me trying to enter Jerusalem, they would jail me. The only way I could get to my interview was by climbing over Israel's Separation Wall. So, at 10pm the night before my interview, dressed in a suit and carrying my papers, I climbed the eight-metre-high wall – a friend with a rope helped me – and dropped down the other side. A nun let me stay in a church that night.

Next day, after the interview, I remember walking out and stopping to look up at the sky. Thanks to the letters and all the help and support I got, my visa had been approved. For these five minutes of simple questions, I had struggled for two years.

But there was still no way to reach America. Israel doesn't allow Palestinians from Gaza to use the airport at Tel Aviv, so I had to apply to cross by land to Amman and fly from there. The Jordanians rejected me for six months. After a while I went to the crossing-point anyway, but Israeli intelligence caught me and sent me back to Gaza.

I was so depressed. After all that. I applied again for permission to leave for Jordan, but even with my US visa I was rejected. Every day was a battle, but they never broke me. After a while I heard that Egypt was going to open the Rafah crossing for a short period. I slept at the border terminal for three days, waiting. I talked, I joked, I fought with people, I sneaked into places I was not allowed – in the end, I got to the Egyptian side. Later, I read that thirty-five thousand people tried to cross that day, but they only allowed three hundred in.

By then I had nothing. A person at CNN had bought me a flight ticket to Boston, but I had to borrow money to get to Cairo airport. At that time, ISIS was strong, and they would carry out attacks on desert roads. The bus was packed. I stood for twelve hours, scanning the horizon constantly. If anything happened, I would get out immediately and run the other way. I wasn't ready to die in an Egyptian bus, not now, not after all this.

I landed in Boston in June, and I was so surprised at how green it was. So many trees. That shocked me – the landscape. Wide open space. Gaza is very small. That was in 2016. I finished my engineering degree and now I

work as a consultant. I recently became an American citizen. It does feel unreal, for someone who came from a Gaza farm, with zero rights, where life is so simple. Nothing is as we think it is. I had an image of the world outside, but I never understood how it worked until I left.

But even now, my hopes and dreams all go back to Khuzaa. I'm grateful I grew up there, in that specific environment, and I would choose it again, even though it's very harsh. I'm trying to make connections, encouraging people in the village to apply for opportunities. My perspective gives me gratitude.

Amir Qudaih was born in Gaza in 1993 and won a Silver Lion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2021 as a partner in 'Border Ecologies', a project highlighting the impact of war on rural Gaza. He lives in the US. Since October 2023 Israel has killed over one hundred members of his extended family, including twenty-two cousins. He was speaking in March 2024.

Graham Usher

FISH AND ORANGES

SPRING 2001

To walk through Gaza is to penetrate the heart of the Palestinian uprising, to realise why it happened and why, sporadically, it endures. This is not simply because you sometimes have to enter Israel's vast, fortress-like Erez crossing into Gaza under fire from Palestinian guerrillas or stones thrown by Palestinian children. Rather, it's because in Gaza you come up against the vast, omnipresent system of control Israel has created – in and through the Oslo Accords – over every facet of Palestinian life, from work to walking. Here you understand why Palestinians are fighting to death to destroy every last vestige of that system.

The siege is not simply economic. It is territorial, colonial in the classic sense, and enabled under Oslo through the army's control of Gaza's stretch of borders with Egypt and Israel, and over the three lateral roads that connect the Strip's seventeen Jewish settlements to Israel. Throughout the uprising, the army has 'secured' these bridgeheads by razing nearly 5,000 dunams [five square kilometres] of Palestinian land, and annexing 468 extra dunams to the settlements proper. For most Gazans, this is beyond collective punishment, and far beyond what is required for 'security'. …

The al-Fara family owns seventy-six dunams of land squeezed between the minuscule Kfar Darom settlement in the centre of Gaza and the vast Gush Katif settlement bloc along its southwestern finger. On 21 November 2000, army bulldozers swept away their guava trees. One week later, armoured pile-drivers pulled down the family house, well and water pump. In December, both arrived again to raze the remaining land of all woods,

fences and gates. ‘We suspect the army is clearing the land to lay a new road, linking Gush Katif to Kfar Darom,’ says Mushir al-Fara. He runs through his family’s losses. ‘Apart from the land, there’s the well, pump engines, irrigation systems, water tanks, the reservoir, fertilisers, furniture and family documents. At a conservative guess, I’d say we lost $200,000 in less than a month.’

Across the way from Mushir’s there is a lunar landscape of craters and twisted metal. This was the western edge of Qarrara, a Palestinian village of 16,000. As the army was ploughing through the al-Fara land, it destroyed twenty houses in Qarrara, damaged another forty and uprooted 5,000 of its olive and citrus trees, all to ‘defend’ the 242 residents of Kfar Darom. There are at least 100 displaced Palestinians, squatting in three tent camps. Hayat Musallim Abu Azan is one of them. ‘No, there was no warning from the army,’ she recalls. ‘In fact, I was scared to death that my eighteen-month-old daughter was under the rubble. She wasn’t, thank God.’ She is utterly ‘black’ about the future. ‘Once the Israelis extend their colonies, that’s it,’ she says. ‘They’ll never let you back.’

But she and the other displaced do return, every night and under fire, if only to assert their presence on the land. On 29 November, the army shot and wounded three Qarrara residents for that assertion. … [Now] there is a wasteland stretching all the way to Kfar Darom. This had been the al-Fara land. ‘Don’t ask me where anything was,’ says Muna al-Fara, a doctor. ‘I can no longer recognise the place. But I will fight the Israelis over this. I will get my land back and receive compensation. I will take it to the Israeli Supreme Court if I have to.’

Like her brother, Muna feels a patriotic as well as personal need to ‘rebuild my house, replant my land and re-dig my well’. In the meantime, she draws sustenance from memory. She remembers her joy as a young girl in 1969 when her father divined a fresh water source on the land and dug the well. She remembers playing with her brothers and sisters beneath the ancient jomaz trees, thick-trunked giants with creepers that touched the earth, brought to Gaza from Kenya by the British during the Mandate. Some were seventy years old.

‘The Israelis felled those too,’ she says. ‘For me those trees were a little bit of paradise.’ She bites hard on her lip. ‘I wonder who the Israelis think we are. We cannot possibly be human to them. They cannot see us as people with feelings, with love. Insects perhaps. Numbers.’

How do people survive? ‘We don’t have a choice,’ answers Imad Heikal, a worker at an international NGO, with a smile. He is right in a way, for survival has long and tenacious roots in Gaza. In 1948 his parents and grandparents lived in tents in Gaza after they fled from their villages on the southern coast. In 1967, they took squatting rights in the homes of relatives after Israel occupied Gaza for the second time in ten years – just as thousands of other Palestinians are doing today.

‘We pulled through the seven years of the First Intifada. We’ll pull through this one too,’ says Imad. Since they are prevented from launching their boats on the sea, Palestinian fishermen cast their nets from the shore. Since there is no fuel, women chop branches from broken olive trees in readiness for the winter.

‘Between 1948 and 1967 we lived on three things in Gaza: fish, oranges and UNRWA,’ recalls Jamal Zaqout, a leading figure in the 1987 Intifada and in this one. ‘And, believe me, the first two were more important than the third.’

Scything wheat, Deir al-Balah, 1993.

Harvesting dates, Deir al-Balah, 2010.

British journalist Graham Usher (1958–2013) lived and worked in Gaza in the 1990s and 2000s, initially in a house on Ludd Street in al-Rimal that 'was decked out in dark, slightly miserable furniture from the '70s, but saved by its expansive tiled veranda, shaded by orange and lemon trees', as his housemate, UN researcher Mark Taylor, described later. Usher wrote for outlets including Al-Ahram Weekly *and* The Nation*, was Palestine correspondent for* The Economist*, and published two books of reportage. Edward Said called his journalism 'the best foreign on-the-spot reporting from Palestine'. A version of this article appeared in* Middle East Report *in 2001.*

Yousef AlKhouri

NAVIGATING LIFE TOGETHER

Just now I am devastated. Yesterday, a little before midnight, the Israeli military targeted the building where my family lives. They were displaced and forced to shelter at the church, so weren't at home when the bomb hit. My family's apartment at street level and the neighbourhood supermarket alongside were seriously damaged, as well as several storeys above. I cancelled my classes this morning and came to the college to process a little. It was a nice building. My parents worked hard and bought that apartment about five years ago. My mum is very upset. She's well connected with her neighbours, who are all Muslim – they love and support each other. Last week her neighbour tried to convince her it's safe. Some people didn't make it out last night.

My name is Yousef AlKhouri, which translates as Joseph the Priest. I come from a family with a long heritage in the Christian Orthodox tradition, going back almost a thousand years. We are native to Gaza. My seven-times-great-grandparents on my father's side served in the priesthood of the Orthodox church in Gaza City. Part of my family's house is on church land: it was built around the same time as the church, in about the fifth century, when Christianity first came to Gaza. My bedroom window when I was growing up overlooked the Orthodox cemetery.

My parents are cousins, and my maternal grandmother Jamila – which means ‘beautiful’ in Arabic – is a Palestinian Christian. She was displaced from Jaffa in 1948 at the age of ten, fleeing with her siblings and stepmother by boat to Gaza. She remained a refugee ever since. My mum had me when she was only eighteen, and I was cared for by my paternal grandmother Naima, which means ‘grace’. She was native to Gaza and lived in the same neighbourhood almost her whole life, serving at the church.

My dad left school at sixteen, apprenticed as a mechanic, but then started working with his brothers making and selling gold jewellery. Gold is very important for Gaza: a generation or two ago, families would still keep their savings in gold. Gold is also part of traditional culture, offered to the bride by the groom’s family. Gaza’s gold souk is huge, maybe seventy or eighty shops, with the oldest section dating back to the time of Queen Helena in the fourth century. I grew up in that souk. My dad brought me to start working with him in the jewellery shop from the age of eight. I spent twelve or thirteen years of my life there, welcoming customers, bringing them drinks, making them feel protected and secure. Sometimes Bedouin women would come from desert villages or Beersheba: their tastes were different from city people. They would bring, say, 500 dinars [US$700] in cash, and buy only very pure, 21-carat gold in large, decorative pieces. It would represent their entire life savings.

But I never loved the work. I didn’t care for jewellery. I’ve always loved literature and history, especially poetry: Fadwa Tuqan, Samih al-Qasim, Mahmoud Darwish of course…

In our neighbourhood, we would all play together. Games of football on open ground, with two rocks as goalposts, would go on for five or six hours. Marbles, because Gaza is sandy: you poke little holes in the sand to play. And we had a game where you build a tower of seven layers out of stones, then one team uses a tennis ball to knock the tower down and run away while the other team tries to catch them and rebuild the tower. Later, when I was a teenager, we would go to the YMCA every Thursday evening: this

mixed group of boys and girls would hang out in the garden or play basketball, tennis or chess. It was very elite, our community club.

Another sport that people love is swimming. The sea gives life to Gaza. I remember my mother, with all the frustration and all the stress and misery of life in Gaza, would say: ‘At least in the evenings, after your dad finished work, we could go to the beach. He’d smoke his cigarette, we’d drink our coffee, and then we’d go back home.’ She said it felt like going to heaven and coming back to hell.

Gaza’s sea is not just a natural resource. People think of it as a friend, someone you can go and talk to, tell your stories and your worries to, share your burdens and know that you won’t be betrayed. The sea keeps everything safe. Even now, the first thing people do when there is a pause in the bombardment is go to the beach. Maybe you saw it the other day in Deir al-Balah: after a night of bombing, people in the morning were on the beach, washing, doing laundry – and if they can get fish to feed their kids, that’s great too. I remember as a child being taken to the West Bank, but it seemed to me that Bethlehem was living in the past. The people were like villagers. They weren’t modern, like us. They didn’t have a sea.

Fishing is commercial, but on a small, family scale, using old traditional boats. A father and his kids might go out for a night and, in the early morning, bring back their catch to sell. In deeper water you use a net; near the shore you fish with a line. There are cabins where you can buy the gear. One type of line is made around a Coke can, with a small weight added: it costs one or two shekels. You use it for a night and that’s it. It’s a very affordable way to relax. My uncle did it a lot. Here in Bethlehem, one kilo of crabs costs about forty shekels (US$10). In Gaza, you can buy a whole box of crabs – six or eight kilos – for thirty shekels (US$8). The sea brings you food.

Fish is number one when it comes to what people cook, of course. But what is actually unique to Gaza cuisine are dishes like rummaniyeh. This is a stew made from aubergines, lentils, pomegranate molasses and a bit of flour to thicken, cooked together with cumin, tahini and hot pepper. Mulukhiyyeh fuul is one of my favourites: fuul – broad beans – cooked

with dried and crushed leaves of mulukhiyyeh, which is like spinach. You serve it with lemon and hot pepper, and raw onion on the side. Then there's falafel: in Bethlehem one shekel buys you two falafel balls, three if you're lucky. In Gaza you get ten. They're slightly smaller, but also spicier: it's a different flavour.

I grew up near Souk al-Zawiyah, which is an extension of the jewellery souk. They have towers of spices there. Gaza was on the spice route between India and Egypt, and the frankincense route from Yemen. These amazing smells are part of Gaza's heritage. When older women from the countryside bring their crops to the markets to sell, they'll often grab your hand or pull your arm. 'Come, come, try this,' they'll say. 'Does your wife know how to cook this?' They'll tug at your wrist in the hubbub of the market, amid the aromas and the sound of Qur'an recitation from the mosques, inviting you to buy so they can feed their family. You feel this deep connection.

Gaza's mentality is urban. In Gaza City at least, boundaries of religion are rather vague and unimportant – and economic class divisions mean that middle-and upper-class Muslim people are usually very engaged with diversity. They celebrate Christmas and Easter. They have Christmas trees. Every year thousands of Muslims join the public celebrations lighting up the city's big Christmas tree. For a Christian to go to the mosque is accepted. Even for a Muslim to go to church is totally fine.

My grandmother would breastfeed her Muslim neighbours' babies, and they would breastfeed hers. There was a meaning to this, aside from practicality. Children fed from the same breast were regarded as siblings, and so breastfeeding was a way to build connections and create an extended family beyond your blood relatives. I remember a Muslim family, al-Hifni, who half-baptised their children. They took their newborns to the church for baptism by the priest, with every detail in place except for anointing the

baby with holy oil in the sign of the cross. Other families did this, too, but the tradition stopped, I would say, in the 1990s.

Most Christians in Gaza are Orthodox. The minority are Catholics and only very few, maybe thirty or fifty individuals, are Protestant. As a child I went to Catholic school, while attending an Orthodox church – and then I took English classes at a Protestant institution. But the majority of students at Gaza's Christian schools are Muslims. I would say as many as ninety per cent. There was no struggle over religious identity. We had arguments, of course, but it was part of healthy dialogue, navigating life together. Later on I went to a government school, where I was the only Christian among five hundred Muslim students. Later still, as part of my law degree, I took classes on Qur'an, Sharia and the Islamic tradition. They've helped me tremendously in my work as a theologian.

Identity is a complex issue. It's not static. As a teenager I began to understand the ideology of occupation, in particular Christian Zionism, and I rebelled against my family faith. I perceived a contradiction between who I was as a Christian and how Christians used the Bible as a tool to justify the colonisation of my land. For a period I was an atheist and read a lot of left-wing literature. We were a group of maybe fifteen rebels: we couldn't reconcile our faith and our reality, and we wanted to be active in the peaceful, non-violent liberation of our country. Yet we saw ourselves as Palestinian Arab Christians who are Orthodox and also part of the Muslim fabric of our society.

Then I fell in love, but my girlfriend's family refused to let her marry me because I was from the same social class and they were aiming higher. That pushed me into despair, and one night I mixed pills and alcohol. I have no memory of about three weeks at that time, but God's hand pulled me away from death. It was a turning point and, at the age of twenty-one, I left Gaza for Bethlehem.

It was at the Bethlehem Bible College that I understood how my Christian faith is anti-imperial and anti-colonial, how it critiques Christian Zionism. I reconnected with spirituality, and in a context that was evangelical but strongly anti-Zionist, I understood how being a Palestinian

Arab Christian is not a contradiction. I decided to dedicate my life to helping others in my community reconcile their identities and break free from their oppressors.

Today, I think I'm in a phase of depression or denial over what's happening in Gaza. It's simply too much to process. I'm grieving that the Christian community, which has such a long history in Gaza, is disappearing – not as part of a natural progression, but because of ethno-religious cleansing by the occupiers.

We have been misrepresented as bloodthirsty, illiterate terrorists, but we are not. We are a beautiful, life-loving, caring community that will host you, feed you and protect you. The world needs Gazans – people who refuse to give in to despair, who will always find a way to prevail. You cannot erase Gaza. You can occupy Gaza, you can destroy Gaza, but you will never take it away from us. It's the same as in 1948, when the colonisers tried to erase Palestine from our memory, and failed. Now they are trying again. We will not give up. We will not give in. We will always rebuild Gaza – in our memories, in our imaginations and in our hearts, until one day we will rebuild Gaza for real.

Theologian and activist Dr Yousef AlKhouri was born in Gaza in 1986. He teaches at Bethlehem Bible College, lectures on Palestinian Christian theology and society, and helps organise interfaith dialogues, including 'Christ at the Checkpoint', a biennial conference on post-conflict reconciliation. He spoke to Kristel Letschert, host of the Stories from Palestine podcast, in April 2024.

Three thousand years ago Jat, or Gat – often rendered as Gath, though the ‘th’ is archaic – was one of the five cities of Philistia, which extended inland from the coastal plains either side of what are now Ashkelon and Ashdod.

Philistia was so dominant that outsiders identified the whole region as P-L-S-T. *Peleset*. *Palastu*. *Pulasati*. *Philistia*.* Through the centuries since – to 450 BCE, when the Greek historian Herodotus described *Palaistine*, and on down the meander of language to our own time – P-L-S-T has remained attached to this land. Its etymology is doubtful, perhaps connoting rival or adversary. That idea could have originated when the people known as Israel were on the rise, perhaps uniting with Philistia’s neighbour Judah and embarking on campaigns of conquest. Mighty, five-citied P-L-S-T led the resistance. It held out for centuries, pushing back against both Israel and Egypt, anchored by the port and cultural metropolis known today as Gaza.

Gaza’s rural hinterland was home to Philistia’s most famous warrior. He lived and died in or near Jat, or Gat, or Gath, and people still tell his story today. It is thought a school of historians finally committed the tale to parchment some 2,600 years ago, during the composition of the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel – where this warrior appears – and Kings. Those historians, of course, were the victors, and we know the warrior only through their eyes. But that mighty Philistine (meaning ‘not-of-Israel’, without pejoration) is still famous. You know him.

But was there really a Philistine champion named in Arabic in the Qur’an as Jalut, or Galyat in Hebrew, or Kalliades in Greek – known in English and other languages as Goliath? (All these and others are the same name.) And did some pipsqueak shepherd really bring him down? The Old Testament tells it twice: 1 Samuel has David slinging the fatal stone, but 2 Samuel names the killer as Elhanan. It may have been that, when the text

was laid down, four hundred years after the event, historians replaced unknown Elhanan with the significant and celebrated figure of David. A later reference in Chronicles tries to explain away the discrepancy by claiming that Elhanan's victim was in fact Goliath's brother. Scholarly David-defenders even suggest there must have been two different Goliaths.

Regardless, the *Iliad*, which was written a century before the Book of Samuel, has the same story: boy hero Nestor fells giant warrior Ereuthalion. So the tale and everyone in it might be better understood as metaphors.

The world's other great Philistine-adjacent story comes from Judges, an Old Testament anthology of tribal hero legends. The best-known is centred on – as if to reinforce his mythos – 'Man of the Sun': Shamsoon, Shimshon or, in English, Samson. He killed a lion with his bare hands. He massacred a Philistine army with a donkey's jawbone. He married a Philistine, and then was betrayed and emasculated by another – Delilah – whereupon the Philistines gouged out his eyes and brought him to Gaza for hard labour. There he killed everyone, including himself, by demolishing a Philistine temple mid-ceremony.

Samson is a solar demigod. He is Heracles, and Gilgamesh. He is the original suicide bomber, consumed by revenge and self-pity. Delilah seems more intriguing, for her origins, her actions and her motivations, but she, predictably, gets short shrift in the literature.

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* P, a voiceless plosive, developed into F, a voiceless fricative. Arabic kept F but lost P. Modern Hebrew retained both, but writes them with the same letter, distinguished only by an often-omitted diacritical dot.

Mahmoud Joudeh

I CANNOT LIE

I trace my origins to Isdud [Ashdod], which was occupied in 1948, but I have spent my entire life in Gaza, the city after which this strip is named. Gaza is the whole world. We are locked inside it and most of us are unable to leave.

This city has always embraced difference: the church of St Porphyrius shares its wall with the mosque next door. I remember 25 December every year, when we would gather in St John the Baptist church in Gaza's Old City, Muslims and Christians side by side in friendship, for the annual concert of music performed by musicians from Palestine and abroad. This has now disappeared, because the churches that were not destroyed are being used as shelters.

Gaza's people have achieved miracles to communicate with the world in the language of the times. They made a city whose first cinema, Cinema al-Samer, opened in 1943. Their city hosts more than ten universities offering different disciplines, and dozens of cultural centres, libraries and theatres – the Said al-Mishal Theatre, Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Centre, the Red Crescent Theatre, Holst Cultural Centre, Abdul Mohsen al-Qattan Centre and others. They created a city open to the world, where the streets are named after lovers, flowers and the sea, Libyan resistance hero Omar al-Mukhtar, French president Charles de Gaulle and United Nations mediator Count Bernadotte; where women have for generations gone out to work and study, engaging in civic life and leading institutions. Visitors come with preconceived notions and leave with changed perspectives, discovering that

Gazans speak multiple languages, learning at a language centre affiliated with the UK's leading universities. Gaza has made a beautiful world for itself. It is a city that seeks life passionately.

But Gazans don't want to be called superheroes. Such labels ease the consciences of onlookers and justify their failure to support people in need. Superheroes need nobody, but we are the opposite: we are people just like everyone else, and we are currently the victims of ruthless aggression that strives to dehumanise Gazans and kill this hopeful Palestinian dream. One simple example. In 2000, Israeli warplanes bombed the Criminal Investigation Laboratory before its inauguration. This lab, developed in cooperation with European countries, was intended to help police identify perpetrators quickly and prevent rights violations during police investigations. But Israel preferred that the police retain their old ways, perpetuating the likelihood of violations and erosion of the rule of law.

Why are we besieged? Is it because we demand the implementation of United Nations resolutions? When will Britain apologise to my grandmother Khadra, who died in her daughter's arms asking to be buried in the home from which the Balfour Declaration displaced her?

Many questions circle in my head, waiting for answers. Instead, I am sent rockets that have destroyed my life and made me a displaced person here in Cairo, searching for shelter, work and a school for my young children.

On 13 October 2023, Israel ordered the evacuation of al-Rimal neighbourhood, Gaza City's most beautiful suburb, established in 1944. My seaside house there, beside the Orthodox Cultural Centre, where I wrote poetry and welcomed friends, was a modest home for my family: my wife Samar, who holds a master's in business administration, my daughter Baghdad, just started in school, and my son Khaled, who learned to swim at the age of five and who now, after one hundred and fifty days of hunger and bombing and sleeping in a tent, asks me every day about his toys and the wooden bed I made for him, which he never slept in once. Khaled complains every night about being cold. The cold is a fearsome monster,

beyond words. It eats your limbs. It stops your heart. It is an indescribable curse, felt only inside a tent.

‘This is the Israel Defence Forces. You have ten minutes to leave your home.’ Imagine with me: ten minutes and your tiny history is erased from the face of the earth – your gifts and the photos of your siblings, the children who were martyred and those who still live, the things you love, your chair, your books, the last poetry collection you read, a letter from your sister living abroad, memories with your loved ones, the dress your grandmother Khadra wore when she had to flee, photos of your mother when she was young, holding you in her arms, the scent of your bed, your habit of touching the jasmine hanging in the window facing west, your daughter’s hair clip, the warmth of the seat, your old clothes, your prayer mat, your wife’s gold, your life’s savings.

Imagine all this passing before your eyes in just ten minutes, the pain sweeping over you as you stand in disbelief then grab your ID out of the sweet tin.

We left home with nothing but my daughter Baghdad’s school bag. Everything else, gone in an instant. I often think, what if we had stayed in the house? We would have died once. Instead we left – and now we die a thousand times a day, from alienation, poverty and the loss of ambition and hope.

A never-ending series of torments because the so-called civilised world does not want to witness the crime in which it participates. We are the victim of their victim, who unleashes upon us the consequences of a historic crime we were never a part of. My grandparents were displaced from Isdud in 1948 and forced to live in a tent, and now we, their grandchildren, are displaced from Gaza in 2023 and forced to live in the same tent.

I am a writer and poet with published work that speaks of love, goodness and beauty. Yet Israel stops us telling the world about our shared humanity by besieging us with continuous killing and a blockade that suffocates every detail of our days, trapping our senses within suffering so we can write about nothing else, draining our emotions until the world grows tired of us from the magnitude of the tragedy we demonstrate. If not

for this suffering, we would swim in clearer, more sustaining waters. I don't want my creativity to be linked to tragedy. My ambition is to create in innocence, freedom and beauty. But Israel and the silent countries of the world insist on dehumanising us to justify siege and extermination.

In March 2024, Rafah experienced a massacre, when occupation aircraft bombed inhabited homes while people were sleeping. It was around 2am and pitch dark. There were dozens of deaths. Part of my family's home was destroyed. One of the victims of the darkness was a boy who survived the bombardment but was trapped under the rubble. We could see his head, but no one could rescue him because his foot was stuck, and there was no equipment to deal with such a situation. The civil defence had to amputate to free his leg and extract him, but he died soon after, a victim of aircraft, darkness and Israel's prohibition on rescue equipment.

After the massacre, when daylight came, residents gathered piles of bodies for burial. There were more than a hundred, in white shrouds. A journalist beside me tried several times to take a photo; he said the lens he was using was not wide enough to show them all. That day I met my friend Rima, a surgeon who had been displaced from al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza to Rafah's Kuwaiti Hospital. She told me about her journey, dodging corpses on the road. As she walked she trod on a nail but had to limp on, with the nail hitting bone, because the army's instructions were clear: any stopping, turning, standing or bending would be met with a bullet.

This aggression has set us back decades, destroying our dreams before our eyes. I have never been pessimistic. I was the one writing about love and beauty, focusing my work on anything to summon up hope and peace. But now I find myself unable to support myself and my family. I cannot lie to them that the future will be beautiful while they witness human rights being violated openly, with nobody able to stop the killing. I do not want my children to grow up on tragedy and relief aid. We are a free and wealthy people, with resources and minds able to create a nation to be proud of.

As I write I am holding back my tears. We used to mourn for a person, a pet, a beautiful memory, a park we sat in, a street we walked on. Then we

would mourn for a family, a house, a neighbourhood. Now, we mourn for all of Gaza.

Writer Mahmoud Joudeh was born in Rafah in 1985. His first book, Orphaned Gaza *(2015), gathered testimonies from the 2014 war, leading to translations and film treatments.* Letters to Baghdad *(2018) explored Gaza City's social, political and cultural contexts. His novel* Garden of Lost Legs *(2022) evokes the struggles of amputees; the translated Dutch edition came out in 2024. Joudeh is also a scriptwriter for stage and screen, awarded Best Theatrical Script at the 2022 Sahara International Theatre festival in Algeria. He contributed this essay in April 2024, translated by Jayyab Abusafia.*

Husam El Nounou

A CHILD IN GAZA

It was about 7pm, and I was driving my car on al-Jalaa Street in Gaza City with my son Numan, aged seven. We were talking about school and what he had done with friends that day, and other things. Suddenly, we saw a big light in the sky and heard a big boom.

My son jumped onto the passenger seat and grabbed my neck. I could feel the beat of his heart and his accelerated breathing.

‘What happened, Dad?’ he asked.

I was shocked for a moment, just like him, but quickly realised what was happening. It was a big explosion. One of the cars in front of us had been rocketed by an Israeli Apache helicopter targeting a wanted man, a policy that Israelis were using to kill wanted Palestinian activists in the Occupied Territories.

The smell was a mixture of dust and live ammunition. I could hardly see anything in front of me. All this happened in less than a second.

Immediately, I stopped the car and grabbed my son, put my arms around him, assured him that it’s OK. We are safe, we are safe, I repeated, don’t worry, I am with you.

Later, my son started to have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – poor concentration and appetite, disturbed sleep and clinging to his parents. As a person who works at a mental health organisation, I did everything possible to give him the needed support to overcome this traumatic incident until his symptoms faded.

A few days after the incident, Numan came to me and said: ‘Dad, I want to say something: I want to be a martyr.’

Shocked, I asked why. To me it was unbelievable, after all the care and love I give to him and his siblings, to hear such a thing. It made me feel like I am a bad father, one of the hardest feelings a parent may have.

His answer came: ‘What does life mean if you can be killed so easily like this, without doing anything wrong? It’s better to kill than to be killed.’

I took a minute to think, then I replied: ‘Son, it is good to die for your home, but it is much better to live for it.’

Husam El Nounou is a father of three and has worked at Gaza Community Mental Health Programme for more than twenty years. He considers himself a human rights and peace activist, and advocates for non-violent resistance. He wrote this piece in 2014.

Editor’s note: this piece was written ten years after the incident described. By then, Numan had finished high school and was studying automotive engineering in Gaza. He later completed his studies in the US.

Youssef Rakha

BREATHE, I TELL MYSELF

With my hand in my sleeping eight-year-old's hair, images of what the Israelis are doing to Gaza's children course through my head. Breathe, I tell myself. Sort through what you're feeling and breathe. Rage. Breath. Fear. Breath. Shame. Breath. Hatred. Breath. Hatred. Breath. Hatred. Breath. Breath. Breath.

Romanised without diacritics, the Arabic words for 'witness' and 'martyr' look identical. Shahid. In its original sense, the first translates to 'one who knows', the second to 'one who knows the truth'. I suppose you only really know the truth when you die, but there are those who know more than they otherwise would because they saw it happen. That is the only thing that makes up for my current helplessness: I am the shāhid and, before the ascension of the shahīd, the one who watches. We are not numbers, the dead keep crying out on my timeline, while Israeli snipers bring down doctors and journalists for being the wrong religion and scions of your rules-based international order tie themselves up in knots over the psychological damage inflicted on supposedly secular minds from the use of words like martyr.

I need to explain to you the reason I identify with the Palestinians. It is not my religion, which I've only ever embraced with ambivalence. It is not my nationality, which continues to embarrass and subjugate me. It is not my ethnicity, which I don't know or care to know with any precision. It is not my language, which has been, in political terms, more an instrument of repression than of liberation. It's the fact that, no matter what they say or do

in the world your civilisation has wrought, Palestinians remain alone and irrelevant. Their existence has no density. So much so that, in many circles, the principal objection to what's happening in Gaza is that it might 'radicalise' a new generation of Palestinians and thus end up hurting Israelis or Westerners again. It's as if they are wicked spirits that taunt you every time you look in the mirror – and, you poor things, you just want to comb your hair in peace.

I have spent my life fighting for values attributed to your civilisation, and I've tried to believe the stories you told me about why the world is what it is. I've questioned my idea of fairness, broadened my understanding of equality, recoiled from every last vestige of chauvinism in my own culture. I've become your model secularist, keener than anybody on world peace and universal rights. But I still don't exist just for you to feel that you would balk at eliminating me. I would love to come out of the mirror and join in the life you command.

Meanwhile, I have no intention of disappearing. And no matter how far I go in your world, there will always be an irreducible and awful Gaza inside me.

Youssef Rakha is the author of The Book of the Sultan's Seal, The Crocodiles *and* Paulo, *which was longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction.* The Dissenters, *his first novel to be written in English, is forthcoming in 2025. He writes for global media including* The Atlantic, GQ Middle East *and* The New York Times, *and lives with his family in Cairo, where he was born and raised. This excerpt is from the essay* I, Ghost, *published in* Guernica *in January 2024.*

Hind Joudah

IN TIMES OF WAR

What does it mean to be a poet in times of war?

It means apologising…
extensively apologising
to the burnt trees
to the nestless birds
to the crushed homes
to the long cracks along the streets
to the pale-faced children before and after death
to the faces of every sad or murdered mother

What does it mean to be safe in times of war?

It means being ashamed…
of your smile
of having warmth
of your clean clothes
of your idle hours
of your yawning
of your cup of coffee
of your restful sleep
of having loved ones who are alive
of having a full stomach

of having available water
of having clean water
of being able to shower
And for incidentally being alive

Oh God,
I don’t want to be a poet in times of war.

Hind Joudah, born 1983, is from al-Bureij refugee camp in Gaza. Her poetry collection Nobody Always Leaves *was published in 2013. She is also a magazine editor, documentary scriptwriter and producer/presenter on Radio Al-Ommal (Workers Radio) and Radio Al-Hurriya (Freedom Radio). She wrote this poem, sourced from* Passages Through Genocide*, on 30 October 2023.*

Rana Al-Batrawi

MY GAZA

Everywhere is crowded at the beginning of the annual summer season, as people arrive from abroad, relatives and families come to enjoy their holiday, children look forward to swimming in the sea. It is very difficult to enter or exit Gaza, either through the Erez crossing in the north, which requires Israeli approval, or the Rafah crossing with Egypt in the south, which requires registration, reasons for travel, all sorts of approvals and payments. Journeys can take days. All summer long, with power for only eight hours a day, we live on the beautiful Gaza seashore, a wide blue panorama with golden sand packed with sunshades. In the hot and humid weather, a popular restaurant called Kazem serves barad, a yellowish drink with a distinctive and refreshing lemon taste. Kazem is famous for its delicious watermelon and fresh fruit.

When the summer ends, autumn comes: school restarts and people get back to work. It is a busy time buying school bags and school uniforms, and everyone is shopping in the markets. Most Gaza families have lots of children, often five, sometimes ten or more. There are government schools and, for refugee children, schools run by UNRWA. The excitement continues as we move into the winter and the holiday season when Muslims share Christmas and New Year with Christians, and churches and private schools host celebrations.

People visit each other every Thursday and Friday – Friday is the weekend, when everyone prepares special meals. Whole families, from grandparents to grandchildren, gather at home. All around Gaza there are

special corners for enjoying picnics and cultural outings, such as the Strawberry Garden and the many archaeological sites. The Old City in the centre of Gaza has a unique character, where you can wander among ancient buildings, busy markets, the Omari Mosque, churches and the gold souk, which is always crowded during the day. It’s a city full of contradictions, where upscale neighbourhoods stand beside refugee camps with simple houses crammed in together, high-rise towers overlooking tiny shacks.

In the streets of Gaza you will see new cars and SUVs alongside donkey carts, used for transport or for selling vegetables and other goods. Restaurants serve falafel, hummus, shawarma and authentic Nabulsi kunafa, as well as dishes for special occasions and weddings such as maftoul, maqlubeh, musakhan, sumakiyeh and rumaniyeh. The day before a wedding, neighbours join in a huge street party, with music and dancing. Women celebrate during the bride’s henna party, a custom of Palestinian weddings. Then the wedding day itself is packed with family, friends and neighbours.

Gaza has many cultural centres, institutions, schools and universities. I teach art, which in Gaza has a special impact through events and community activities. Every month or so, one of the galleries will stage a new exhibition. Colleges and universities teach fine and applied arts, as well as engineering, medicine, management and so on. Gaza people are strongly committed to education and attainment, in light of the siege that has continued for sixteen years – particularly in terms of channelling the energies of young people and facilitating the exchange of cultures to widen horizons and experiences. A few have been fortunate enough to find opportunities to travel and engage.

Gaza is rich in agricultural land, and also has the Wadi Gaza valley, which separates Gaza City from the central areas around Deir al-Balah. It is classified as a nature reserve, protecting flowers, birds and wild animals, but is frequently violated by the occupation or by municipality authorities, which has turned it into an environmental disaster.

We often reflect on Gaza's beauty and its strange contradictions. Gaza is where my artistic personality was formed; it has a spirit of its own that is unlike anywhere else, where friendships and social interactions are treasured. The people are generous and outgoing. Few complain. However there is also suppression of dissent and limits on freedom of speech. Criticising the government or intervening in politics is not tolerated. There is corruption, and bribery undermines the rule of law. When the government acts unjustly, citizens cannot object, or they will be threatened or even beaten. There is domestic violence, there is governmental violence and there is injustice. As in many Arab countries, there is a ruler who controls what people can say. The people of Gaza are trapped in a dilemma: those operating in the private sector are most invested in their own personal development and productivity proceeding smoothly, but that is only possible as long as they do not interfere in matters of governance.

All of this was how things were before 7 October 2023. Since then, everything has changed. I used to love connecting with family, listening to my grandparents' tales of survival and the stories of the past. Every detail of life felt connected with every other detail. Life was full of joy, togetherness and uncomplicated simplicity. But Gaza has been completely destroyed. There is no vision for a future in which we can return to the way things were.

Artist Rana Al-Batrawi was born in Gaza in 1983. She runs art workshops and courses for children in sculpture, drawing and upcycling, and has exhibited her own artworks and sculpture in Gaza and internationally, including twice solo. She represents Palestine in Femin-Art, an artists' association for women based in Turkey. She contributed this essay in April 2024.

Mariam Shahin

THE FREERUNNERS OF KHAN YUNIS

This is a story of how two young men, born into occupation and poverty, were able to use their own bodies as tools of liberation – and how, through my work, I was privileged to help them speak to the world.

I first visited Gaza in 1991, shortly after that year's Madrid 'Peace' Conference, presented as an attempt to find an internationally supported solution to the ongoing Israeli war against and occupation of the Palestinians. Many of us back then didn't fully grasp that much of the so-called peace effort was really a way to co-opt and end Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation.

On 25 November 1987 – later known as the Night of the Gliders – two fighters entered Israeli-controlled territory from Lebanon on hang gliders. One was shot dead straight away. The other killed six Israeli soldiers and wounded seven before being killed himself.

The message from that night was that the occupation army was not invincible. It reverberated across Palestinian society. Two weeks later four Palestinians, three of them from Jabalia, were killed by an Israeli truck driver in Gaza, and people declared enough was enough. The Intifada that began that day in December 1987 – the Uprising of the Stones, as it was called – was the culmination of twenty years of frustration borne by a civilian population pummelled, imprisoned and killed by a foreign military. They had made substantial progress in terms of garnering international solidarity and gaining a degree of economic independence from the Israeli economy, and in the end people simply tried to physically drive the

occupation army out. The non-violent uprising spread around the country – but it began in Jabalia, alongside Gaza City. Then as now, Gaza captured the world's imagination.

Known to most as a poor area by the sea, Gaza and its people were standing up to one of the world's strongest armies, with little more than sticks, stones, economic boycotts and occasional Molotov cocktails. It was with this heroic image ingrained in my mind that in 1991 I headed to Gaza with a group of friends, as if on pilgrimage, to see what this fabled place was really like.

A decade later, the promise of freedom for the Palestinians which began at Madrid had faded and died. Gaza, with its many cities and refugee camps, became the target of increasing attacks and isolation by the still-present, still-occupying Israeli Army.

It was in this atmosphere of broken promises and suffocating occupation and violence that two friends, Mohammad Aljakhbir and Abdullah Enshasi, grew up. Born in 1988 and 1989 respectively, they were raised in the Khan Yunis refugee camp a few streets apart. Their families lived there after having been driven out of Majdal and Hamama in 1948, long-settled communities north of Gaza that were erased by what is now the Israeli city of Ashkelon. The only world they knew was one of prejudice, obstacles, forbidden areas, military checkpoints and restricted freedoms.

'We grew up watching out for the Israeli soldiers who were patrolling our streets when we got out of school every day,' Mohammad remembers. 'Sometimes we would throw stones at them and run.'

In 2005 Israeli forces retreated from Gaza, only to impose an ever-tightening blockade, launching surveillance technology and drones to monitor Gazans like mice in a cage. It was around then that I moved to Gaza, making my life there while writing and producing films. That year was also when Abdullah noticed a documentary online called *Jump Britain*,

about freerunning, a type of improvised, acrobatic athleticism that uses running, jumping, flipping, tumbling and rolling to navigate objects and buildings. Freerunning focuses on elegance in movement, while its close cousin, parkour, is more about efficiency in getting from A to B. The film followed freerunners in the UK as they dodged and weaved across natural and built environments. Abdullah showed it to his friend. Mohammad already played basketball and practised gymnastics. Both were physically agile. Freerunning seemed a perfect way to deal with the obstacles that the Israeli occupation presented.

‘We approach each obstacle in a different way. We improvise as we move. We look at our object, figure out in our head how to overcome it and develop a strategy on the spot,’ Mohammad told me. ‘Momentum and focus are key.’

Gaza parkour athlete Mohammad Aljakhbir, 2011.

Freerunning became Mohammad and Abdullah's art of choice to overcome the psychological and physical confines of their lives, jumping from rooftop to balcony to the sandy ground, running up apparently insurmountable vertical walls, tumbling and flipping through the air against Gaza's blue skies. In 2008 the two friends launched the Gaza PK parkour group.

'One day we were filming parkour on the beach,' remembers Mohammad. 'We posted a photo, and someone from JUMP magazine saw it and asked us for a high-resolution version with the name of the parkour artist – which was me – and the photographer – which was Abdullah. I took advantage of the opportunity and asked that we also be included in the magazine's list of parkour teams worldwide, with our flag beside our name. I explained that we just wanted to be like any team, recognised and credited. He responded quickly, and added the name of our team, Gaza Parkour, with the flag of Palestine next to it. We were so happy! We felt we accomplished something.'

Parkour athletes practising on Gaza’s beach at sunset, 2011.

By 2011, they were producing annual videos of their acrobatic talents across the rooftops and alleys of Akkad and Block G, their respective neighbourhoods in the refugee camp. They had a huge following: parkour was a growing sport and art form among the youth of southern Gaza.

That year, my photojournalist colleague George Azar and I made *Free Running Gaza*, a documentary that aired globally on Al Jazeera English. For an accompanying article, Gazan psychologist Dr Eyad al-Sarraj told me how ‘sports and the arts are important ways for young people [here] to express themselves and an outlet for their frustrations. Many young people in Gaza are angry because they have very few opportunities and are locked in. A form such as freerunning gives them an important method to express their desire for freedom and allows them to overcome the barriers that society and politics have imposed on them. It literally sets them free.’

In Mohammad’s words: ‘Because we don’t have freedom of movement and so can’t look for work, we are prisoners in our camps, essentially.

Wherever we wanted to go – to the sea, to Gaza City – there would be military checkpoints and barriers that stopped us. Getting to know this artistic performance sport gave us a tool to circumvent these obstacles, and even to end the control that the occupiers had over our mental and physical freedom. Sometimes Abdullah and I would get to Rafah, and we would look over into Egypt and think, What's past this border? How do the people live? What would happen to us if we could cross? One of our dreams was to cross the border, to overcome that obstacle.'

Abdullah, in his quiet way, added: 'I think it's important for people to know that in the middle of the blockade and so many wars, a parkour team and community developed and thrived here. I dedicated my life to this form of self-expression.'

In 2012, an Italian sporting organisation invited Mohammad and Abdullah to participate in an event in Milan. The following year both friends left Gaza for Europe, seeking freedom and opportunity.

Meanwhile, the seeds they had planted continued to grow. In 2021, videos emerged of young Palestinians running and leaping over the ruins of Gaza's eleven-storey al-Jalaa Tower, the local headquarters for the Associated Press and Al Jazeera media organisations that had been reduced to rubble hours earlier in an Israeli airstrike. Parkour had grown into a spontaneous expression of resistance.

Interviewed by Günseli Yalcinkaya in 2022, Ahmad Matar, another Gaza PK athlete, explained: 'When people see a destroyed building in Gaza, it's easy to scroll down and forget about it. But when you see a person flip off that building, [you] understand these people just want their freedom. When I'm in the air, I forget everything. I just enjoy the moment and escape the problems surrounding me.'

At that time, Gaza PK had only four members, who practised together and also taught parkour skills to younger generations. The group's leader

was Abdullah al-Qassab. ‘I stay for my family and friends, but the actual quality of life is shit,’ he said. ‘There’s no other word for it. [Freerunning] is the best way I can cope with the situation around us, it lets us forget about it momentarily. But you land on your feet and you’re still in Gaza.’

Today, Mohammad lives in Sweden, where he still regularly participates in freerunning workshops and sports events, passing on his skill to his two daughters, Dania and Ranja. He keeps in close touch with his family in Gaza, and with his old friend Abdullah, who is now in Italy. Having suffered a spinal injury during a parkour performance in 2018, Abdullah uses a wheelchair. He works with a local athletics organisation, part of Italy’s Paralympic Federation, and raises funds to support his family back in Gaza.

‘Abdullah is doing well despite his injuries,’ says Mohammad. ‘In Italy people are warm, like us. That is helping him. In Sweden I feel isolated. People are more individualistic and a bit cold. I can’t think about anything except Gaza, to be honest. I want to go home.’

Palestinian filmmaker Mariam Shahin has made around eighty documentaries across the Arab world over more than three decades, many on Palestine. She has lived in Gaza and covered Gazan society and politics for Al Jazeera and many US and European TV networks. She now lives in Salt, near Amman, and has authored or co-authored six books, including Palestine: A Guide *(2006) with George Azar. She contributed this story in May 2024.*

Louisa Waugh

THE OLD HEART IS PUMPING

One of my regular taxi drivers in Gaza was a man called Harb, whose name translates as ‘War’. This was double irony, as Harb was softly spoken and also drove his rusty cab as though he were meditating. He once lit up with excitement telling me how eating fresh lettuce leaves could help me sleep better.

One midweek afternoon towards the end of winter Harb dropped me off in a narrow back street in the Old City, beside a building of oak-coloured sandstone bricks, its edges worn smooth by time. A small sign was mounted above an arched wooden doorway, the door itself open just wide enough for a streak of pale sunlight to lead the way inside.

I’d been in Gaza for about three months, working at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights with a team of investigators and lawyers. The heaviness of our work was tempered by intense camaraderie and banter. My colleagues often invited me for dinner, or late-night coffees in cafés that were packed and buzzing in defiance of regular Israeli airstrikes and car bombs, including in the city centre. I enjoyed my work and already had a great social life. But I had taken up smoking again, and a small, tightly bound knot had taken up residence in my gut, twinging day and night like a stuttering candle. I needed to find a way to relax.

I pushed at the door. It revealed a staircase descending, irresistibly, into a passageway lit by coloured oil-lamps. Clumping down, I made my way along the dim corridor and through another slightly open door into a large, domed chamber lit by a huge iron chandelier. Set back into the thick walls

was a separate lounge area, draped with rugs and piles of crimson cushions. The light was soft. It felt peaceful and very, very warm.

A man with a thick silver moustache was sitting on a wooden chair. We looked at each other for a moment before he stood up slowly.

‘Good afternoon. This is your first visit?’

As he spoke his moustache twitched like a little silver fish.

‘Yes. Are you Abu Abdullah?’

‘Indeed I am. Welcome to Hammam al-Samara. This is our only traditional bathhouse in all Gaza, since the fourteenth century at least. I have been here for forty years, and my family – we are the Wazir family – have looked after this *hammam* for more than one hundred years.’

Ten minutes later, clad only in a thin cotton wrap – I was lucky: I’d arrived during the hours set aside for women – I stepped into the inner sanctum, the steam chamber. A wall of wet heat hit me full force. For a moment I couldn’t see anything. Then I made out half a dozen other women, hunched on low stools washing themselves or lying on towels on the hot stone floor as if sunbathing. Tiny porthole windows of stained glass cast thin bright strobes through the steam. I chose one of the basins built into the wall, smooth as soapstone from aeons of bathers, and began to scrub my body.

After washing, my skin red and tingling from tipping bowl after bowl of cold water over myself, I lay down on the floor and surrendered to the heat. My mind drifted, conjuring up images and moments from these last few months: the brilliant green of orange plantations in northern Gaza where citrus perfumed the dusty air; wheelbarrows full of fresh strawberries in Beit Lahia just outside Gaza City, where farmers had just harvested a bumper crop; the wafts of coffee and cardamom, cigarette smoke and car fumes; a random encounter with ‘Mr Number One’ – so mad-looking, so eloquent-sounding – as he patrolled al-Nasr Street wearing his homemade placard plastered with images of Hamas and Fatah, declaring how unity was all that mattered; the camels padding disdainfully up Gaza’s city beach, their drivers telling me they rode up from Rafah for the day ‘because we have nowhere else to go’; Gaza’s lingerie market over in another corner of

the Old City, where pious, robed men sold fabulous belly-dancing outfits, scanty bejewelled bras and musical panties to crowds of women with utter sincerity (I had laughed with glee and bought several outfits, wrapped in plain covering).

It wasn't all good. Vivid shards of violence made me wince: a man in a Gaza City side street beating his young daughter with the heel of his boot as her face contorted in howls; a farmer standing amid bloated chicken corpses, his farm and livestock crushed by two Israeli bulldozers; the Mediterranean Sea swirling, dark as petrol, beside the Al Deira Hotel as the blast of a nearby Israeli airstrike incinerated a commander from Islamic Jihad in his car, sending the ten thousand dollars cash he was carrying billowing up into the starry night sky.

I sat up slowly, rubbing my hot face. Gaza was all this, beautiful and horrific, intensely friendly, threatening violence. The Strip was a carapace being hit over and over, to shatter it and cleave the innards. I had never wanted to live anywhere more than I wanted to live here right now. I wanted to understand the story of Gaza, even though I knew in my aching gut it could only end so badly.

I stumbled sleepily towards the changing room, where I could hear women laughing. This hammam that Abu Abdullah told me had already stood for a thousand years would, I knew, become a soothing companion, its old pipes pumping water like the beat of the human heart.

Peacebuilding expert, security consultant, writer and adventurer Louisa Waugh lived in Gaza between 2007 and 2009, working at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. Meet Me in Gaza *(The Westbourne Press, 2012), her third book, was longlisted for the 2014 Travel Book of the Year. A decade earlier,* Hearing Birds Fly*, about Mongolia, won the Ondaatje Prize. After several years on peacebuilding projects in West and Central Africa, Louisa now lives in Scotland. She contributed this memoir in May 2024.*

Editor's note: Hammam al-Samara was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike in December 2023.

Diala Khasawneh

THE SHAWWA HOUSE

Lying in Haret el-Shawwa in the Shuja'iyya neighbourhood of Gaza City, this beautiful house was built in the mid-nineteenth century by El-Sayyed ['Lord'] Mohammad Shawwa, the owner of vast estates which extended to Umm al-Rashrash [now Eilat]. Farid, his grandson, inherited the house and lived in it with his family: he married Itaf Sharabi of Jaffa, and they had seven sons and a daughter.

I met Itaf Sharabi – or Umm Ziad, as she is called – her daughter, Saida, and her sons, Said and Nabil, in her house in Amman. She proudly told me of her twenty-eight grandchildren and fifteen great-grandchildren, all of whose pictures hung around the house. Um Ziad, originally from Nablus, grew up in Jaffa, where her father Basheer Sharabi worked as *qaim maqam* (district officer). In 1931, at the age of sixteen, she married forty-two-year-old Farid Shawwa and moved with him to Gaza to start a new life. She regularly took her children to Jaffa to spend time with her family, and her first two sons were born in her childhood home. Those trips remain as sweet memories for her. Gaza, though, represented a dramatic difference, as life moved from the liberal, urban setting of the modern city of Jaffa to conservative Gaza. She lived in the big house with her husband's family surrounded by extended family living nearby in the neighbourhood.

Farid's two sisters never married and were part of Itaf's family; she talks about them with great fondness. Nabil remembers them, too, and his brother Ahmad Rami (named after the Egyptian poet) wrote in his diaries: 'I remember late Aunt Amneh, the prettiest of all women…' He and Nabil

slept in the same bedroom as Amneh, and Ahmad reminds Nabil not to forget their childhood when she took care of them and told them bedtime stories.

Nabil, just returned from a ceremony in Beirut honouring his uncle, the renowned intellectual Hisham Sharabi, was born in 1936. He remembers the air raids of 1948 clearly, and how that war was a turning point in every aspect of their lives, politically, economically and socially. The family's radio, a big Zenith German contraption, was their gathering place to follow the news of the war: neighbours would ask them to turn the volume up as they listened outside the windows.

The Shawwa home is a simple example of the traditional Arab house, its spaces following in division and function the typical house of the era and place. Designed and executed by craftspeople and workers from Gaza, it is built around a courtyard, which provides a sheltered, interior garden and leisure or work space. Rooms opening off the courtyard offer privacy when needed for the residents of the house and allow space for festive celebrations and guests. The building's structure relies on arches and barrel and cross vaults resting on thick stone walls. Decorations highlight window and door arches. Tiles of white stone and black stripes cover the ground.

Most activities would centre on the ground floor. The upper storey contains two bedrooms, and sandwiched in between is a mezzanine level providing one relatively low-ceilinged bedroom. Two grapevines in the courtyard – one giving red grapes, the other white – were trained onto trellises, creating shaded spaces beneath. During the holy month of Ramadan, the *tabliyyeh* dining table, which the aunt favoured, would be moved from the dining room to the *liwan*, which opened onto the courtyard. Itaf only later introduced chairs, after she finally convinced everyone that they would be more comfortable than sitting on the floor – the influence of sophisticated Jaffa loud and clear.

Nabil told me (and I also read in Ahmad Rami's diaries) how significant the courtyard was in their daily lives as children. It was where they took refuge from the summer heat, and where they fought and played sports. In the centre of the courtyard stood a tall, fruitful palm tree, heavy with family

memories. ‘Ahh, the palm tree,’ they tell me, nostalgically. ‘When did it fall down?’ asks Nabil. His mother answers: ‘In 1970, maybe. After your father died.’ Said’s memories of the courtyard are more painful, though: he was the youngest of the boys, so in their football games was always made goalkeeper. Because of his age and the family hierarchy he spent a lot of time alone, and says that is how he developed the habit, which he still has, of speaking loudly to himself.

Another significant space in the house was their father Farid’s library – kept locked, since among other items it contained the book *The Thousand and One Nights*, described by Nabil as essentially pornography.

Farid’s hobby was taking care of the garden, *al-hakoura al-oula*, a big piece of land near the house, although not adjacent. It had space for the gardeners and for storage, and also housed goats, chickens, pigeons and most importantly the family’s white donkey, which was referred to as ‘the horse’. All the daily vegetables for the household were grown in this garden, including artichokes – Farid Shawwa proudly took credit for having introduced these to Gaza with seeds he had brought from Egypt. He cultivated a huge variety of plants, and common and exotic trees made the garden almost an attraction.

The Shawwa house is now old and vacant. In 1962, as Shuja’iyya became crowded and rundown, the Shawwa family moved out to the more modern neighbourhood of al-Rimal by the sea. Neighbours then asked if they might use the old house as a *madafeh*, or guesthouse, which the family generously accepted. The mansion became a welcome breathing space amid Shuja’iyya’s packed streets, as neighbours relaxed in its spacious courtyard. Houses live with the life they create.

Nabil tells me he now wants to open up his family’s garden to let the children of his old neighbourhood play. He dreams that one day the Gaza Municipality will help him turn the old house into a cultural centre, a space where all the children of Gaza can breathe.

In 1999 and 2000, Amman-based architecture graduate Diala Khasawneh worked with the Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation in Ramallah to document seventeen notable houses around

Palestine – photographing them, reproducing floor plans and gathering descriptions. The result was Khasawneh's book Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions *(Riwaq, 2001). This is an edited extract.*

Shareef Sarhan

SHABABEEK / WINDOWS

What did Gaza mean before 7 October? Gaza, which I know, and many do not. I love its details and hold a vivid picture of it in my memory. Daily life invariably brings multiple perspectives on place and context, as well as people and activities. Luckily for me, I used to live and work in a unique space, where the field of photography and the arts allowed me to see Gaza from a unique angle. All that most people know about Gaza is war, destruction, the blockade and the occupation. But there are other sides to the story. People go to work, and hope, and love. I try to capture all aspects of life.

TODAY…

We drink our morning coffee to the sound of Fairouz's voice. On the way to the studio you notice the beauty of the city, the crowds of morning people. The sea means everything to us. It provides the air we breathe, and freedom and security. It's our future. It's our blue horizon. You arrive, open the door, make coffee, assemble colours, and begin to weave a new painting for a beautiful day, full of love.

THE POWER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Images play an important role in changing and shaping our lives, especially for me in my work as an artist and photographer. Every day, the image of the street and the city and watching for details helped in creating fresh outlooks made up of all the lives we live in that small space of this big world.

WINDOWS

From dream to reality – the Shababeek art collective [*shababeek* means ‘windows’], which became an artistic space, was established in 2009 as the first place to offer a supportive and nurturing environment for visual artists in Gaza. Its purpose was to create a generation of young artists, providing opportunities for artistic production, networking and building relationships with Gaza’s audiences. This carved a presence for the venue, which over time became one of Palestine’s most important artistic spaces, making its mark on society in Gaza and further afield. The space was damaged in January 2024 and completely destroyed in April 2024 – lost like the rest of the city’s artistic venues, from which all our dreams and all our artworks, including valuable and irreplaceable painting and sculpture, have gone for ever.

But we are still alive, and we love life.

Shareef Sarhan, Fidaa al-Hasanat, Ayman al-Husari and Yousef Kalloub paint the freedom mural at Shababeek Gallery, Gaza, 2023.

An art class at Bunat al-Ghad (Builders of the Future) youth centre, part of the Culture and Free Thought Association, Khan Yunis, 2023.

Artist, photographer and designer Shareef Sarhan was born in Gaza in 1976. He has exhibited in Palestine and around the Arab world, Europe and the US. He co-founded the Shababeek contemporary art collective in Gaza, which supported hundreds of artists until its exhibition space was destroyed by an Israeli assault in April 2024, along with around 20,000 paintings, sculptures and photographs, including Shareef's own entire output of 5,000 pieces. He told The Art Newspaper*: 'If you want to change any community you have to use culture and art. Shababeek is not just a place; it is an idea.' Shareef contributed this piece in April 2024 from Istanbul, where he is launching an initiative to support Palestinian refugee artists.*

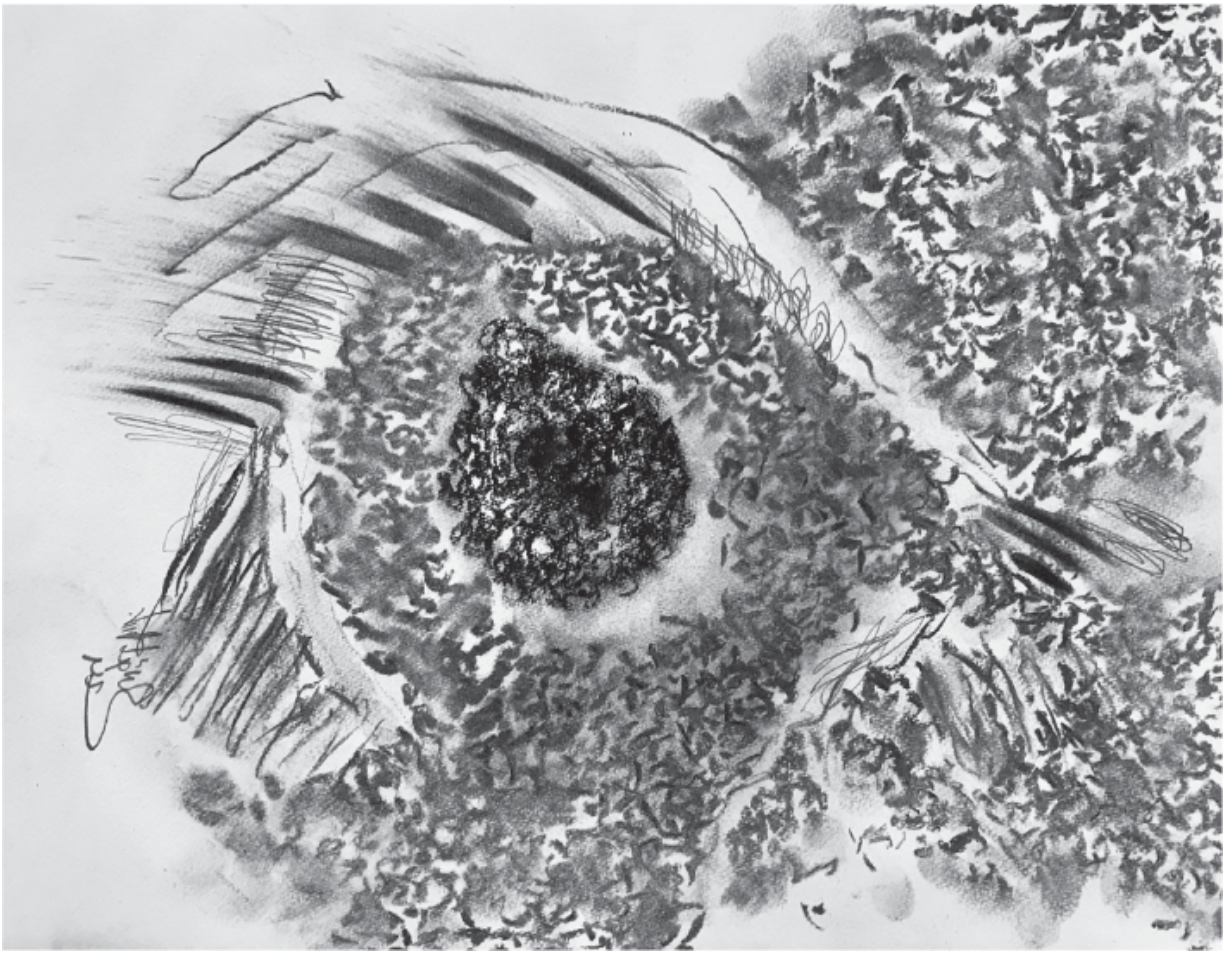
Basel El Maqusi

FRAGMENTS AND SPLINTERS: AN ARTIST STATEMENT

24 FEBRUARY 2024

Time is fragmenting and paths are broken, not just the shrapnel that rips people into pieces, not just the shards that slice buildings in half. Humans themselves are splintering, life is shredded, nothing is complete, nothing is perfect, everything is torn. People, buildings, streets, trees, tents, human rights. Life itself has become shrapnel, shards and splinters. Who will gather the fragments of a child who has lost their parents, a man who has lost his beloved wife, a mother who has lost her baby, workers with no livelihood, patients with no hospital, entrepreneurs with destroyed factories, householders whose homes, built with years of sweat, are now ruined?

All my life as a Palestinian, as an artist, I did my best to create complete images. Today, in this genocide, I am trying to gather fragments, shards and splinters to form one image. Can I do it?



Displaced to Rafah’s camps, Basel El Maqusi depicted the crowds overwhelming the city in a series of sketches in 2024, of which this is one.

Basel continues to lead art therapy classes for camp residents.

Artist and photographer Basel El Maqusi was born in Gaza in 1971. He has exhibited locally and internationally, and is a co-founder of Gaza's art collective and gallery Shababeek ('Windows'), which was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes in April 2024. Now displaced, he continues to create art and lead workshops in art therapy for residents of the camps around Rafah.

Khaldun Bshara

CULTIVATING HOPE

Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time
Close to the gardens of broken shadows,
We do what prisoners do,
And what the jobless do:
We cultivate hope.

—Mahmoud Darwish, ‘Under Siege’ (2002)

We, in Gaza, are fine. But how are you? What about your conscience, values, everything? We’re concerned.

—Reem Abu Jaber, resident of Deir al-Balah
(France 24 TV, 16 October 2023)

During a heritage crafts conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2018, a scholar asked me about the wellspring of optimism and hope within the Palestinian people. I improvised a response, drawing attention to the ‘Great March of Return’ rallies in Gaza that had begun in March 2018 and were still ongoing at the time. Palestinian children, youth, the elderly, girls and boys, men and women, were gathering peacefully at the barrier erected by the Israeli military to prevent Palestinians in Gaza

from returning to their homeland in today's Israel. Every Friday they marched, assembled, raised their voices in chants and even hurled stones at the Israeli posts, aware of the potential dangers – being teargassed, shot at, injured or killed. Yet they returned week after week to protest against the blockade that has trapped them since 2007, and against the larger issue of being denied return. They hoped that they might find their way back home through this collective symbolic gesture. Their steadfastness, persistence and courage in the face of danger exhibited the unwavering hope and optimism of the Palestinian people.

People subjected to colonisation, which is inherently violent, inhumane and irrational, cannot be held to conventional notions of rationality. This does not imply that they lack rationality, but rather that they adopt a rationality that is forged by their abnormal situation.

For the colonised, stripped of their land and space, lives and aspirations revolve around time, of which they possess an abundance. Time becomes the weapon of the vulnerable; from outside we may label it as *sumud* (steadfastness) or *sabr* (patience). Under the constant pressure of siege, in a world where justice seems unattainable, enduring hope and unlimited time are the essential forces that drive the calculations for otherwise incomprehensible actions.

As an architect and heritage practitioner, I witnessed first-hand these context-dependent rules during works in Gaza's historic areas, where I was fortunate to play a role in the restoration of several historic buildings: Dar al-Saqqa (2013) and Dar al-Ghusayn (2020), both in Gaza City; and Deir al-Khadr or St George's Monastery in Deir al-Balah (2015). In addition, in 2022 my colleagues at Riwaq, the Centre for Architectural Conservation, based in Ramallah, restored al-Wahidi House courtyards in Gaza City and helped plan other conservation projects.

These buildings are among the historic treasures of Gaza, echoing back through millennia of continuous habitation. Gaza's rich and tumultuous history is underserved by the limited number of historic buildings that

survive, only hinted at by the city's ancient walls and fortifications, the sacred spaces of temples, churches, monasteries, mosques, shrines and mausoleums, as well as the communal hubs of hammams, bazaars, serais and the mansions of the elite alongside more humble dwellings. Riwaq's *Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine* (2006) documents over four hundred historic structures, primarily concentrated in Gaza City. A significant portion of Gaza's historic buildings were destroyed during World War I, while others gave way to rapid urbanisation and the surge of refugees from western Palestine in the wake of the Nakba in 1948, as high-rise buildings were constructed to accommodate a sudden tripling of the population.

The restoration projects followed a series of brutal assaults on Gaza: Dar al-Saqqa following the 2012 war, Deir al-Khadr after the 2014 war, Dar al-Ghusayn after the 2018 and 2019 wars, and al-Wahidi following the 2021 war. These historic mansions were adapted by Riwaq – in partnership with Iwan, a local community centre in Gaza – to serve as sanctuaries for women and children and hubs for cultural activities.

In the context of Gaza, restoration – the act of returning structures to a previous state of preservation – raises troubling questions. What is the point of restoring a building when it may not survive the next wave of destruction? Riwaq has proposed reimagining the idea of sustainability in Gaza to be anticipating destruction even while fervently hoping to avoid it. What does it mean to embark on 'post-war' reconstruction when newly erected structures are destined to become the targets of the next assault? The answer is hope. Hope remains the driving force behind the resilience of the people of Gaza, who inspire donors, executive agencies and heritage practitioners like myself to initiate projects that focus on the future, even where the future is so uncertain.

While Gazans hold various opinions about their political representation and the multitude of political parties, consensus prevails regarding resistance. The people of Gaza aspire to *amn wa aman* ('security and safety') – but not at the cost of accepting occupation. They often describe Ramallah as subservient, as if it is on a quest for peace, prosperity and

happiness. Gaza emerges as the epicentre of continuous resistance, decline and suffering.

Why does the restoration of heritage serve as a unique window through which we can glimpse the boldness of hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances? In Gaza, we encounter a context that not only shapes thinking around the design of restoration projects but, more significantly, dictates approaches to the execution of those projects. Gaza becomes a living example of the tangible interplay between realms of power, knowledge and creativity in the face of adversity.

In the West Bank, as elsewhere, architects and restorers can choose from a rich array of materials, techniques, equipment and supplies. Restoration begins with a conceptual design, which gradually takes shape as it is translated into a physical reality. In the unique context of Gaza, however, this conventional process is reversed. Gaza has severe limitations on materials and construction techniques, as a result of Israel's prohibition of approximately seventy basic goods deemed to have military uses. This list, which includes spaghetti, chocolate and hair conditioner, proscribes essential construction materials such as wood, steel and cement. So in Gaza, we must begin with the materials that are immediately available and then work backwards, crafting a design that fits the limitations of the resources on hand. It becomes a process filled with surprises. A willingness to adapt shows the extraordinary creativity in problem-solving that defines the spirit of the people of Gaza.

Riwaq's ambitious mission in 2013 to restore the historic al-Saqqa mansion began with a comprehensive design, detailed bills of quantities and precise specifications for the project. We gave these to our colleagues in Gaza, anticipating site visits with prospective contractors, but soon learned that our plans had little value. We had to completely redesign the project, to focus on the materials and supplies that were available in Gaza's markets and workshops.

The effectiveness of conservation practice in the Gaza Strip is a sharp critique of the alienating approach that has come to permeate our existence in the West Bank, particularly in the post-Arafat era after 2004. The push

toward structural adjustment policies, privatisation and dissolution of public services (except for the security apparatus) has brought stress, debt and a culture of individualism. Gaza emerges as a symbol of resistance, challenging the choices that we, as Palestinians, are striving to achieve, wherever we may be. It raises essential questions. Who ultimately endures the siege? What does it mean to have a liberated body yet remain trapped beneath layers of apprehensions and anxieties?

As I write in early November 2023, the Gaza Strip remains fragile evidence of resilience amid relentless destruction. It has endured unconscionable pain. Thousands of lives have been lost and thousands more changed for ever by the attempt to erase an entire population. But Gaza, like the legendary phoenix, has astounded us time and again, rising from the ashes of despair. Hope cannot resurrect the fallen or restore the fractured landscapes, but it can feed our spirit and ignite the fire of our imagination, conjuring an alternative future. Gaza lives with unyielding bravery, testament to an unbending human spirit that defies oppression and seeks freedom.

Architect and anthropologist Khaldun Bshara teaches at Birzeit University and serves as a senior advisor for Riwaq, the Centre for Architectural Conservation, where he has worked since 1994 to document, protect and restore built Palestinian heritage. This is an edited version of a 2023 essay in Jerusalem Quarterly.

Said Fadel

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

I’ve been playing music all my life. When I was three years old there was a school party run by the Red Crescent and they asked for someone to play the drums. I ended up performing on stage in front of a large crowd of adults.

My dad is obsessed with music, and he passed this love to me. We would sit and play music together every day; it was our ritual. There were always lots of instruments scattered around the house, and we would pick two and begin. No one would complain. Whoever else was around would join in or sing – my siblings, friends, aunts, music students being taught by my dad. We lived in a house of music. Music bonded us.

Everything I learned was from my dad or self-taught. Later I used online videos to develop my technique and took a course in music theory and composition, which gave me a huge boost. But aside from the Edward Said Conservatory, which is a national academy for classical music, Gaza doesn’t have centres for learning music. During my time at university, and while I was working, my dad and I developed the idea to create a small academy, to share the knowledge that we have – even though we are not qualified teachers – and to foster an environment for sharing music. We had no institutions to incubate us, so to make something happen we knew we would have to do it ourselves. Our society has too many other basic issues to worry about.

We launched in 2016 and, even though the academy lasted only three years, it attracted a lot of interest. In the first couple of months, we had

more than seventy students, from small children to adults in middle age. It was a full-time job: we were running schedules, managing teachers and resources – but nothing is normal in Gaza and things often got interrupted.

What helped the academy become so popular was Sol (or Soul) Band, the group I started with a bunch of friends. When I was a kid, my cousin was in two hip hop groups that were famous in Gaza – RFM and DARG Team, 'Da Arabian Revolutionary Guys'. I used to love spending time with them, and that's how I learned what it means to be in a band, to rehearse and perform. An aunt gave me a keyboard, and I would spend hours on it, learning and playing anything. By the time I was twelve or thirteen I was performing wherever I could, in groups and organisations, summer camps, gatherings. Most of the bands at that time were of older people playing simple instruments. I connected with a friend of mine who was as enthusiastic as me, and we started to get invited to play at parties and events.

By 2012, we had a reputation and some followers, and we had grown into a group of five musicians. We even earned a bit of money to cover expenses, but it was still frustrating, because we were only playing requests and covers of old classics or folk songs. In 2016 we planned our relaunch, playing our own music.

That gig was indescribable. It took place in the Red Crescent's hall and we allocated 450 tickets – but in the end 900 people turned up. It was quite a scene. Nothing like it had happened before in Gaza. Some people even said the videos circulating afterwards were fake. But they weren't. It was real. That was our Gaza – not images of destruction, darkness and poverty, but young people laughing and dancing, enjoying life. I was elated, on top of the world. People were happy, and we were their kings. It felt like the right people in the right place at the right time. We even had our family's support, with our parents in the front row, cheering us on. We spent three thousand dollars to make that night happen, money that should have gone on our studies.

Towards the end of the gig, though, government authorities arrived and shut the event down, ordering people to leave and calling us in the next day

for interrogation. We were banned from playing music for two years. It was sad they felt they needed to kill those dreams.

After that, we couldn’t risk performing in public. So, we launched the music academy that I mentioned before, as a place for us all to meet, sing and enjoy music without the fear of being arrested. It survived until 2019, but we simply couldn’t sustain it any longer: we had no funds, and our clients could no longer pay for their children’s musical studies.

Musician Said Fadel was born in Gaza in 1997. He was speaking in March 2024 from Rafah, where he is displaced with his family.

Haifa Farajallah

MY VOICE IS MY LIFE

My days before the war were filled with music. I couldn’t wait for my work hours to end so I could spend all evening and late into the night in my musical life, listening to music, playing music, singing. My voice is my source of income and the most beautiful thing in my life. I do some radio and commercial voiceover work, but I am mainly a vocalist, singing folk songs and collaborating with bands and music institutions around Gaza.

I’m now in my early forties. Things were much harder when I was young. If I went out, I would tell my family I’m going to a cultural centre, rather than a music venue or to practise with a band. Perceptions of music back then, and especially of women participating in the music scene, were very different. But in the last few years, ideas changed dramatically for the better. Gaza had a music life. There was huge progress in teaching music, understanding music, in the eagerness to produce all kinds of musical styles. Lots of people worked in the music industry. Organisations like Al-Sununu, established by the Russian pianist Elena Rostropovich, were really excellent in Gaza, supporting us and developing children’s skills. Women joined choral groups that would perform at public events, and we started to see families accept that women can be part of the music scene; they were happy to encourage their daughters to take part. People began to understand that music is a way to express emotion and release stress. You could walk around the city and see people sitting together in public, playing instruments and singing; there was no fear or reticence. I’m even a bit jealous of this new generation, growing up in a time when all of this is

normalised and acceptable. They are enjoying a freedom that didn’t exist for my generation.

I had to force a space for myself in the music scene. When I started, there were hardly any women singing publicly in Gaza. I didn’t wait for permission and started singing for schools and in small events and competitions. My family supported me, and slowly the community got behind me. I passed that on, and encouraged my friends to sing, but it takes a lot of courage to stand on a stage and face an audience. Not many women felt comfortable doing that.

In 2006, I was walking in Gaza City when my phone rang. It was an invitation through national TV to participate in a music festival in France. I said yes immediately, then sold my phone and used the money for my passport. It was a fantastic trip. I enjoyed it so much, and sang a lot of old traditional Palestinian songs with a political twist: *Mijana*, *Ala Dalouna*, *Wayn ala Ramallah*, and others. People loved them.

I’ve sung in France and Egypt, but I’ve never been to Jerusalem or the West Bank. That’s my ultimate dream, to experience the music scene in the other half of this country and meet fellow artists.

Haifa Farajallah in the studio, 2015.

Once I was singing in Gaza to mark International Women's Day. I was the only woman: the whole band was men. My solo was the anti-occupation song *Yumma Mweil al-Hawa*, which includes a famous line: 'O my mother, I can more easily accept wounds in my flesh than the rule of the wicked over my life.' As I sang it, I glanced down at three Hamas men from the police in the front row. They made threatening gestures towards me. The show went on, but I was very worried. Luckily nothing bad happened to me then.

I also want to talk about another aspect of my identity. I am part of Gaza's African community. We make up about two per cent of the population, I think. Some people ask about our origins. My family came from Bir al-Saba [Beersheba] and, according to my father, the Arabian Peninsula before that, but I don't know exactly. I would like to look into it after the war. Even within the African community there is diversity, though as far as I know the different families aren't connected. I love the fact that

as people of colour we are part of mixed, cosmopolitan, diverse Palestinian society – but Gaza's physical and political barriers mean that we don't have a relationship with other African-Palestinian communities. When I went to France I was very proud of my Palestinian identity, but I met lots of people with African origins who saw me as one of them. One woman even told me that, if I ever felt discrimination in Palestine, they would adopt me in France.

There is discrimination here. When we visit areas of Gaza where people aren't used to seeing people of colour, we do encounter whispering or comments or hostile looks. It is racism that comes from ignorance. I believe I have lost job opportunities because of my skin colour – and also because of sexism. There are lots of deeply rooted stigmas: Black men find it easy to marry light-skinned women, but for me, as a Black woman, it is very difficult to find a husband who is not Black. It makes no sense, and it's very unfortunate.

I am Palestinian. I am staying in Palestine. I love music and I intend to continue.

Haifa Farajallah is a singer and musician who lives in Gaza. She was speaking from displacement in Rafah and al-Mawasi in May 2024.

The Dom of Palestine self-identify in English with the word ‘Gypsy’, even though in Europe and elsewhere that word has become loaded and, in some contexts, pejorative. Before this bombardment, Gaza was a regional centre of Dom culture.

Dom roots, like the roots of almost all the Gypsies, lie in India. In that country, a low-status caste of people who travel, and who earn a living from music and craft-making, was – and still is – known as Domba. In irregular waves of migration beginning roughly fifteen hundred years ago, some Domba people began to move westwards. Some reached Armenia and the Caucasus around the eleventh century. They are the Lom, who now speak Lomavren. Some continued on into eastern and central Europe around the thirteenth century, and some of these kept moving, reaching northern and western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They are the Rom or Roma, who now speak Romani (and whom the English mistakenly named ‘Gypsies’ as a truncation of ‘Egyptians’). And some stayed in Turkey and Iran and Central Asia and the Arab lands of what we now call the Middle East, travelling independently or forcibly relocated from place to place by rulers or invading armies. They are the Dom and they speak Domari.

Down the centuries the Dom reappear here and there, always on the edge of things. Brought to entertain the Shah of Persia as dancers and musicians. Exiled first to the Mediterranean coast, then to the islands of Greece, to be kept well away from power-centres in Damascus and Baghdad. Employed as acrobats, fortune tellers and bear handlers in Constantinople. Scraping a living in Cyprus selling nails and handmade belts.

Today there are maybe two million Dom altogether, most in Turkey and Iran. There are sizeable communities in Jordan and Egypt, and there used to be many in Syria, before the war there. Roughly twenty thousand Dom live

dispersed across Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. They are Muslim (bar a very few Christians) and speak Arabic, and live within Palestinian communities, but identify neither as Palestinian nor Israeli. They are Dom.

Almost everybody calls the Dom ‘Nawar’, but that term, derived from the Arabic word for fire, is a racist slur. It has pejorative connotations of fire-worship, deceit and witchcraft, and has come to stand for people lacking decency and civilised values. People who are dirty, living in filth, begging from others. Some translate it as ‘black’, suggesting it refers to the Dom’s often darker skin colour. But few people consider the disrespect, or care. They just say ‘Nawar’ and spit. ‘The Jews treat us like Arabs, and the Arabs treat us like dogs,’ said one community member, who asked not to be identified with the remark.

UK-based linguist Yaron Matras, who has studied Domari, wrote:

A Dom dancer at a Bedouin camp near el-Arish, 1934.

> The earliest known attestations of the Dom and their language in Palestine date from the early nineteenth century. There are two branches of the community, whose separation goes back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century and in all likelihood much earlier, but who maintained close contact until the 1948 war. The first was based mainly in Jaffa but travelled along the coast and to the Lower Galilee. Members of this group engaged in occupations that included bear-and monkey-leaders, dancers and musicians. They became refugees in 1948 when Jaffa was conquered by Israeli forces, and have since been settled in refugee camps in northern Gaza.
>
> The second group was based in Jerusalem, travelling throughout the West Bank. The primary trade of the men was metalwork, while the women supported their families by selling artefacts or begging. Although musicians and dancers appear to have existed among this group, too, members nowadays tend to distance themselves from such occupations, as well as from the Dom community of Gaza, with whom these occupations are associated.

For years, or decades, outside knowledge of the Dom's existence, let alone their culture or history, was virtually nil. In 2002, ethnographer Allen Williams wrote about the Gaza community in *Kuri*, the journal of the US-based Dom Research Center:

> In 1350 Ludolphus von Sudheim noted the presence of Gypsies ('Egyptian of the tribe of the Pharaoh') in Palestine. Today, more than a thousand Dom live in the area known as the Gaza Strip. The current residents are not the descendants of those espied by von Sudheim. The many changes in governance, the variations in demographics resulting from the influx of refugees and the nomadic culture of the Gypsies make the possibility of continual residence over such a lengthy period of time extremely remote.

The majority of the Dom of modern Gaza is settled in the Jabaliya refugee camp near Gaza City. Some of the older members of the community remember when their families travelled throughout Sinai and the Negev. Those nomadic days ceased for them approximately thirty years ago, yet the Dom of Gaza remain more closely associated with Dom groups living in Egypt and Jordan than with those in the West Bank. Other Gypsies living in Jabaliya arrived more recently as refugees from other coastal areas such as Jaffa. These modern residents live in refugee housing and makeshift dwellings.

The economic situation of the Dom has deteriorated in proportion to regional deterioration: as employment opportunities have decreased, despondency, hunger and malnutrition have increased. A small number of Gypsy youth have secured higher education and professional level jobs, but these are exceptions. Gypsy children can attend public schools, but where their identity is known they endure ridicule from the other children. In the absence of educational and social reform, the Dom will continue to yield their potential for advancement to pursue their traditional occupations. This is not a negative matter in every situation; however, it can create a dilemma in which negative stereotypes are reinforced and the attendant bigotry bolstered.

Employment in dancing and singing is waning in Gaza, though still very much in demand, but begging and fortune-telling are on the rise, particularly among women, who travel with young children to larger cities to beg in the streets. Personal interviews conducted in April 2002 reveal that there are three or four different Gypsy groups in Gaza, each with its own *mukhtar*, or leader. Recent visitors to Gaza discovered that although the Gypsies there participate in the current Intifada, Palestinians maintain their distrust and disgust for them.

Two years later, Williams offered a new population estimate of 5,500 to 6,000 Dom individuals in the Gaza Strip, five or six times higher than

previously thought. ‘Included in that number are some 400-450 Dom from Egypt who were “trapped” in Gaza [following the war of] 1967,’ he wrote.

Over the next few years community building by a few individuals among Jerusalem’s Dom raised awareness, though ignorance and racism persisted. In 2013, the US news site *Al-Monitor* published perhaps the first account of Gaza’s Dom by a Palestinian journalist in English, by Asmaa al-Ghoul:

> Adorned with bright patterns faded by the years, part of a belly-dancing outfit appears from an old closet. Zoohoor has not worn the outfit for a long time. To be specific, not since the start of the Second Intifada in late 2000.
>
> Zoohoor used to dance. Her feelings about it are a mix of guilt and pride. She first boasted, ‘I learned to dance by myself, and I was a good dancer. I started dancing when I was sixteen.’ Later, she revealed, ‘I repented, and now I pray.’ Dancing is not the only thing toward which thirty-one-year-old Zoohoor expresses contradictory feelings of pride and shame. These feelings are also fed by her being a Dom girl.
>
> ‘I am proud to be a Dom girl, and I say this publicly. Sometimes I feel reluctant because of the shock with which people react, but then I pluck up the courage, raise my head and admit that I am a Dom girl,’ Zoohoor asserted.
>
> Zoohoor is not the only member of her family who formerly danced. At one time, her aunt Ferial danced at celebrations in houses across the Gaza Strip. She had dozens of outfits of various colours and earned large amounts of money.
>
> Dina, twenty, is also a Dom and confirms that for her people, dancing is not unethical. She dances, but then she returns home. She does not engage in relations with men, and lives by the moral standards taught to her by her mother. Art and singing are part of Dom culture and heritage, but Dina does not like acknowledging this history. She blames it for the isolation of her people and the injustices that they endure. She

said, ‘I walk in the street, and I hear people whispering, “That is a Dom girl” – that is, a dancer of loose morals – and this embarrasses me a lot, but I try to disregard their comments.’

Isolation and racism are not the only problems affecting Dina. She rarely leaves the area where she lives, a section in northern Gaza called Dom Alley. Dina also suffers from matters of the heart. As a Dom girl, her suffering is manifold. She had a three-year relationship with a young, non-Dom man, but he was forced to leave her because his family refused to let him marry a Dom. His breaking up with her broke Dina’s heart. Her nineteen-year-old brother, Salim, may have acted more wisely. He has not told his lover that he is a Dom. He says, ‘If she knew I am a Dom, I am sure she would dump me. Our society adopts a different attitude as soon as they know my origins. I suffered a lot in school because of this discrimination.’

Asmahan is a Dom who lost not only her lover when she was made to marry a relative, but also her job because of her ethnicity. She hid her identity from her colleagues, but when she invited them to her wedding, they immediately understood that their customs were different from other people in Gaza. For a start, Dom weddings are mixed, with men and women singing, dancing and playing music together.

‘My heart sank while I was sitting in the bride’s chair. I saw their faces changing when they realised I was a Dom girl. Since that time, I haven’t returned to work, and our financial situation is dire. I believe that our fathers were unjust to us when they chose art as a profession. In the eyes of society we are religious and social degenerates, although in the past we used to be seen as an example of creativity and ethics,’ Asmahan, twenty-two, confided.

Asmahan agreed with Zoohoor and Dina that Gaza has changed. People from different social classes no longer wish to marry them, although it was a common occurrence in the past. Moral and religious prejudices have become even more rigid.

The Dom are not represented in parliament or in any of the political factions or institutions. They do not benefit from the international aid

sent to the Palestinian people of Gaza. It is as if where they live is invisible to the broader community and the government. Some Dom women have, therefore, begun begging in the streets, while the men find work in *fadous*, popular male-only groups who play drums and march during wedding processions.

Zein, a forty-year-old Dom, said that she left Gaza at one point to spend a number of years in Jordan. She said Dom people are treated better there, although racism exists as well. The Dom have one representative in parliament, and there are also Dom who have become doctors and engineers, unlike in Gaza, where they suffer from poverty and unemployment.

Asmahan spends long hours crying alone, especially when she thinks about her father, Mohsen, now deceased. She used to love hearing him sing. He was keen to protect them from harm at all times. ‘The thing I hate the most in Gaza is the look of greed on some men’s faces who think I would be easy to have since I am a Dom girl. I also hate when people describe others as Dom as a way of insulting them. When I am in the street or the grocery store, I hear some parents telling their kids off. They say to them, “You Dom boy” or “Why are you acting like Dom people?!”’

The Dom people have become more religious and sometimes shun discussion of the history of their dance and art, perhaps to give the impression that they are like everyone else around them. As Dina said, ‘I always have to prove to my friends, colleagues, taxi drivers and everyone else in society that I am the best, the most generous and the most affable and polite person.’

Although Zoohoor no longer wears her dancing outfit, she continues to take care of herself. As she ended her interview, she related an experience she had recently had. While driving her to her neighbourhood, a taxi driver asked her, ‘How can a woman with your beauty and poise live next to the Dom people?’ She hung her head and left.

Yet old habits die hard. Not long after, *Al-Monitor* published an inflammatory piece in English by another Gazan journalist that recycled the slur ‘Nawari’ and quoted a government official denying the existence of Gypsies in Palestine, casting doubt on Dom cultural origins and condoning the racist marginalisation of minority groups ‘[whose] rituals run contrary to the traditions of Gaza society’. *Al-Monitor*’s reporter seemed unable to hold back his own revulsion as he wrote: ‘They perceive women as income earners just like men. … Many women beg, and passersby are shocked by their lack of shame.’

The status of Gaza’s Dom in 2024 is unclear. Community leaders elsewhere have little or no contact with them – which tells its own story – and are extremely wary of Israeli surveillance of communications. ‘It’s a very bad situation. I believe many have been killed already. I don’t want to lose hope,’ was as far as one person would go.

Noor Aldeen Hajjaj

I DO NOT CONSENT

16 OCTOBER 2023

Diaries of displacement in southern Gaza.

The other side of death, destruction and fear.

I fall asleep at four and wake up a minute later to find that it’s past six. I walk to the bakery, where there’s a long line, and after three and a half hours – more than the amount of sleep I’ve had – my turn arrives. I’m told I can’t take more than one bundle of bread. I tell him we’ve been displaced, there are seventy of us altogether including children, and two bundles won’t be enough. He says I can go back and stand in line again if I want more. I take the bread, mutter a prayer and leave.

I walk half an hour home, and they tell me they need water. I take the jerry can, walk to the water filtration station, and join a queue longer than the last one. Three hours later, it’s my turn. I get home again after a long day, and we tell the kids one glass of water will have to do; don’t waste it. I lay my body down on the sofa to rest a little, then they tell me they want bread and food from the supermarket – so I return for more waiting and more inhumanity.

Later, we redivide the available space and cover the floor of the tiny flat with thirty bodies. We make sure the women and children have all got room, then distribute ourselves out, two sleeping on the couch and two staying awake in case something happens, God forbid, so they can quickly wake everyone else up – not that that’s necessary, because after less than half an hour of sleep, we all wake up anyway with the sound of bombing,

and the children cry until their mothers send them back to sleep… And so on until daybreak, and the cycle begins again.

1 NOVEMBER 2023

I live in Shuja’iyya, on the eastern edge of Gaza City. Every night, the sound of the explosions is constant – explosions of different kinds, coming from different directions – and with every explosion that rocks our house and our hearts, we hold on tight to one another, knowing that at some point there’ll be an explosion we won’t hear because it will have already blown us up.

This is why I’m writing now; it might be my last message that makes it out to the free world, flying with the doves of peace to tell them that we love life, or at least what life we have managed to live. In Gaza all paths are blocked, and we’re just one tweet or breaking news story away from death.

Anyway, I’ll begin.

My name is Noor Aldeen Hajjaj, I am a Palestinian writer, I am twenty-seven years old and I have many dreams.

I am not a number and I do not consent to my death being passing news. Say, too, that I love life, happiness, freedom, children’s laughter, the sea, coffee, writing, Fairouz, everything that is joyful – though these things will all disappear in the space of a moment.

One of my dreams is for my books and my writings to travel the world, for my pen to have wings that no unstamped passport or visa rejection can hold back.

Another dream of mine is to have a small family, to have a little son who looks like me and to tell him a bedtime story as I rock him in my arms.

My greatest dream is that my country will have peace, that children will smile more brightly than the sun, that we will plant flowers in every place a bomb once fell, that we will trace out our freedom on every wall that has been destroyed. That war will finally leave us alone, so we can for once live our lives.

2 NOVEMBER 2023

Today I went for a little walk around the city – or rather, what remains of it.

I saw how its colours have contracted into one single colour. Where did this grey come from, this grey that has the power to impose itself upon all the colours we know, if not bearing tonnes of explosives?

I walked across vast amounts of rubble, trying to tread carefully, as if in a minefield, so as to avoid every spot where children had sketched out dreams upon memories.

I wasn't afraid of touching frayed electrical cables in the street; they were just hangman's nooses, witnesses to all this destruction.

I saw mountains of shrouds being carried on a truck to the last and only safe place on earth.

There are no funeral processions in which martyrs are carried upon shoulders to their final resting place, because their entire families – martyrs just like them – accompany them to the grave.

Perhaps the last wish they made before the bombs fell was the same we all make: if we are to die, then let us die together. We don't want to give death the chance to leave one of us alone, grieving for the rest of his or her life over the life the others should have lived.

I passed by a school, now a shelter for displaced children, and my heart bled to see how humanity can be violated, how our basic needs can be stripped down such that we end up haggling over a gallon of water or a paracetamol.

Other people are walking in all four directions searching for a bundle of bread, or somewhere to charge the batteries of the torch they use at night, or water that's safe to drink, or other basic necessities that aren't available any more.

All this was just in the course of a short walk, no more than thirty minutes, which took me up and down a few nearby streets. Most of the houses hadn't survived the strikes that hit their roofs, and had fallen to the ground, collapsing on top of their inhabitants.

God, the scale of the catastrophe. Words and images cannot come close to conveying it. We can’t bear all this any more…

We’re so tired. Please God let this be over sooner, and not later.

Noor Aldeen Hajjaj, born in 1996, was a writer from Gaza. His novel Wings That Do Not Fly *came out in 2021, and in 2022 his first play,* The Grey Ones*, was performed on stage. He was one of hundreds of people killed on 2 December 2023 when Israeli war planes bombed about fifty residential buildings in Shuja’iyya, Gaza City.*

Omar Karmi

SONIC BOOMS

11 JULY 2006

Five-year-old Layan cupped her hands over her ears and screwed her eyes shut when she tried to describe the effect of a sonic boom. She said the sound scares her, even though her father, Muntasir Bahja, thirty-two, a translator, has told her ‘a small lie to calm her’ – that the boom is nothing more than a big balloon released by a plane and then popped.

Muntasir said he illustrated the balloon-popping principle to his daughter, but his explanation has not stopped her from fearing the massively loud thunderclap caused when Israeli fighter jets break the sound barrier over the Gaza Strip, as they did twenty-five times (mostly in the wee hours of the morning) between 25 June and 4 July [2006], and as they continue to do. Layan’s mother, Arish, twenty-eight, said her eldest child has also started wetting her bed again, something she had outgrown two years earlier. All three of her young children ‘are very frightened lately’, she continued. ‘They are very tired and very upset, and they get sick and vomit. They’ve lost a lot of their appetite. They are a little wild and I’m finding it more difficult to control them.’

In the distance, from the direction of Beit Hanoun, a town slightly to the north of the home of the Bahja family in the Jabalia refugee camp, the sound of intermittent artillery fire can be heard. ‘That’s the sound of a bomb,’ said Layan, somewhat dismissively, when asked. ‘That doesn’t scare me.’

Physician Thabit al-Masri [runs] the neonatal intensive care department of al-Shifa Hospital, the Gaza Strip’s biggest medical care facility. With

thirty incubators, the unit, which was built with foreign aid, handles a third of Gaza's premature births and all emergency cases. [On] a warm, sticky 4 July afternoon, all incubators were occupied on the pleasantly air-conditioned first floor. All this equipment hummed along on the hospital's private generators, as Israel had bombed Gaza's only power plant on 28 June.

'We shouldn't be operating at capacity,' al-Masri said. 'But we don't have much choice. In the past ten days, with the heightened tensions and the sonic booms, the stress on mothers has been tremendous.' He said doctors have noticed spikes in admissions of pregnant women experiencing complications at times of increased stress and violence in the Strip. According to al-Shifa's senior obstetrician Adnan Radi, the number of women admitted who miscarried or went into labour prematurely has risen from an average of two to four a day, to as many as ten. Since 28 June … three stillbirths have been recorded, where normally doctors say they might see one every five or six months.

The doctors are unsure why there have been so many stillbirths. But, said Radi, the rise in miscarriages and premature births is not hard to understand. 'The sonic booms, combined with all the other stresses, have a very bad effect on the health of pregnant women. The shocks can lead to premature contraction of the uterus, a ruptured membrane and premature delivery of the baby. Whenever there is this booming, the next day we see a rise in the number of premature deliveries and miscarriages.'

Being subjected to a sonic boom is a profoundly distressing experience. Beyond the immediate shock of the explosion, there is a physical sensation caused by the vibrations as well as a momentary loss of orientation. The boom comes from above and, unlike artillery fire or a missile impact that can be located by the direction of the sound, it wraps itself around a person as if he is right in the middle. 'Look at how people react when there is a sonic boom,' psychologist Ahmad Abu Tawahina pointed out. 'Either they start laughing or they almost try to jump inside themselves.'

Abu Tawahina, senior clinical supervisor at the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, said Israel was engaging in a conscious strategy

to reduce Gazans to a ‘state of learned helplessness’. ‘The Israelis are trying to make trauma overwhelming, and that happens when it is unpredictable, unavoidable and uncontrollable. They never used sonic booms before disengagement’ – the 2005 withdrawal of Israeli soldiers and settlers from the Strip – ‘because their settlers were here among us.’

Conventional models of diagnosis are hard to apply in Gaza, Abu Tawahina went on to say. ‘We’re accumulating trauma. You talk of post-traumatic stress disorder, but we’ve never experienced the “post” bit, just the trauma, and that is ongoing. Now everyone talks of sonic booms. Before they talked about salaries. Even without the sonic booms and shells and bombs, life in Gaza is very stressful. People can’t move in and out of the Gaza Strip freely. Some families have become fragmented in different parts of the world. All these things have a negative impact on psychological health.’ …

One of Abu Tawahina’s patients is Huda Ghalia [aged eleven, survivor of Israeli shelling of a Gaza beach on 9 June 2006 that killed seven members of her family. Huda was filmed beside her father’s corpse, crying out for him.] She suffers, he said, from the whole spectrum of behavioural, emotional and cognitive disorders. ‘We tell parents that when there is a sonic boom, the first thing they should do is gather their children in their arms to make them feel safe. But we know from talking to the children that they can feel that their parents are afraid. When parents are afraid, to children it means everyone is vulnerable. This leads to a lack of respect for authority. It is something we have seen since the First Intifada [1987–93]. Palestinian children fight authority. They will go and throw stones at Israeli soldiers. But then they will come home at night and wet their beds.’

Muntasir and Arish Bahja are doing what they can to calm their children and keep them out of harm’s way. With Muntasir’s parents in the flat downstairs, the children are never left alone, a great help for Arish, who at the moment mostly has to wash the family’s clothes by hand. (‘Don’t ask me about the ironing,’ she grimaces.) They have also kept their children off the streets since 28 June, making them stir crazy, says Muntasir.

But even these two educated and careful parents can’t think of everything.

‘Baba! Baba!’ Layan suddenly cries out, collapsing in a fit of laughter at her father’s side.

‘Do you know what she’s doing?’ he asked, before answering his own question. ‘I tried to prevent them from seeing the footage, but it was on all the time. She’s acting out the scene on the beach with Huda Ghalia.’ ‘Sometimes she calls herself Huda,’ added Arish.

In July 2006 British-Palestinian journalist Omar Karmi wrote for Middle East Report *as Israel launched a major ground and air assault on Gaza prompted by militants’ capture of an Israeli soldier a few days earlier on 25 June. These are excerpts from his dispatch.*

Fadi Atrash and Dareen Tadros

TARGETING CANCER

Fadi Atrash: Our relationship with the health sector in Gaza goes back more than twenty years. About thirty-five per cent of people receiving cancer treatment at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem are Gazan – that represents 1,300 patients in 2022, and even more in 2023, 1,350 until October, when of course everything stopped. They stay for anything from two or three days up to months at a time. Treatment, bed and food are free for our patients, paid by the Palestinian Authority through the Ministry of Health in Ramallah. Before this war we also offered a free bus that would take people to and from the Erez crossing for Gaza – though the Israeli Army often rejects permits for a companion accompanying the cancer patient.

Dareen Tadros: The Israelis tend to refuse parents of children from Gaza, but approve permits for grandparents. The companion must be over thirty-five, they say. We have tried to pressure them to change this, because it produces a situation in which elderly people – who may not cope well, or who may need care themselves – are forced to accompany young children as they endure extremely arduous cancer treatment without their parents. This is the inhumanity of the occupation.

FA: This, and other factors, prompted us to reassess the cancer situation in Gaza. Its hospitals and expertise were good, but the infrastructure is poor and there are too many delays in diagnosis and treatment. We began to think differently. Instead of waiting for patients to come to us, we considered establishing a presence in Gaza to catch cancers earlier and at least begin treatment there.

In 2022, we launched a partnership with Gaza's al-Ahli Hospital (also known as the Baptist or al-Mamdani Hospital). We trained eleven doctors at Augusta Victoria to become the core team running a new cancer unit at al-Ahli. They would build further capacity locally, supported by our own specialists. We overcame numerous delays and bureaucratic problems to successfully bring medical scanners and specialist equipment into Gaza, and installed it using local contractors. Gaza usually has no more than eight to twelve hours of electricity a day, but the treatment unit needs a constant supply; that required investment to ensure power cuts would not affect patients.

Our goal was early diagnosis, but also to improve public education on cancer, build capacity among local cancer specialists and create a sustainable contribution to Gaza's healthcare sector with potential for expansion. We were planning to inaugurate the new unit on 30 October 2023.

DT: Even as Palestinians we have a certain perception about Gaza before we go there. But every time I went, I was taken by the beauty of the place, its atmosphere and life. I worked almost two years on this project. After 7 October [2023] I couldn't sit still, I was pacing up and down with worry. On 14 October when the Israelis threatened al-Ahli Hospital, I talked to its director, Suhaila Tarazi, and we tried to think of ways we could stop them attacking. The helplessness and hopelessness is awful. A few days later

hundreds of people were killed in that explosion at the hospital. Then they attacked it again in December.

Cancer diagnosis and treatment in Gaza is of course zero right now. It’s a terrible situation. Hospitals that are still functioning have become emergency centres. All non-urgent treatments are cancelled. The cancer unit at al-Ahli is damaged but still standing. Some of our employees have survived, and we continue to support them. Our equipment is OK. The hope is that the project will launch as intended. We don’t know when.

Intifada and Gulf War veterans playing basketball, Gaza, early 1990s.

Surfer Sabah Abu Ghanem, 14, waits for a wave, Gaza, 2013.

The Augusta Victoria Hospital is one of the largest and most important medical centres in Occupied East Jerusalem, providing specialist care to Palestinians from Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, particularly cancer patients at its advanced oncology unit. Hospital CEO Fadi Mizyed Atrash, MD, and Gaza Project Manager Dareen Tadros were speaking in March 2024.

Esmat Elhalaby

OUR SIEGE IS LONG: REFLECTIONS ON DARWISH AND BSEISO

How do you break a siege? How do you escape from prison? How do you get back your land? Palestinians have faced these questions, like most colonised people, for generations. From the 1950s onwards, meetings of those countries called Afro-Asian or Non-Aligned announced their support for the decolonisation of Southeast Asia, of ‘French’ African colonies, and then ‘Portuguese’ African colonies, of one colonised nation or another. Yet the resolutions for a free Palestine have stubbornly remained unfulfilled.

Moments of decolonisation, in relation to the recalcitrant Palestinian case, have been occasions for jubilation. We may recall the scenes from southern Lebanon in May 2000, when the Israeli military finally withdrew from the region. Israel had been in Lebanon, with the help of its right-wing Lebanese adjuncts, since 1982, when it invaded to evict the Palestine Liberation Organisation from their Beirut headquarters. That summer, the Israeli military laid siege to Beirut for more than two months, bombing the densely populated city and killing thousands. While many Lebanese died, Palestinians were the principal targets of the Israeli campaign.

Among those huddled beneath the bombs were Muin Bseiso and Mahmoud Darwish, two of Palestine’s most prominent poets. They would both later produce book-length accounts of the siege but, over the course of one evening that summer, they wrote a poem as one.

‘Letter to an Israeli Soldier’ is what they named their poem. In one stanza, the two poets address the ‘inhabitant of the tank’.

We write to you
Before a shell ignites us or ignites you
Here is a message of the last besieged to the last besieged
We write from a fragment you sent … to carry you
From the darkness of the ‘ghetto’ to our bodies
… We write to you

Bseiso and Darwish ask:

Can one piss in a tank?
Can he read in the tank?
Can a person fly pigeons in a tank?
Can one fuck in a tank?
Or plant trees in the tank?
…
How long have you been in the claws of the tank?
How long have you been safe?

The poem enacts an incredible reversal: the poets, themselves confined to an apartment at the mercy of missiles and mortars, taunt the soldier besieging them. The Israeli soldier is confined by the steel that is meant to protect him. They write in their letter, ‘You are in a dungeon, behind bars.’ Many of the poem’s stanzas end simply with the refrain *Hal anta fi aman?* – meaning, *Are you safe?*

Meanwhile, the poets have their own refrain: *Our siege is long*.

Our siege is long
We shall bake the stone
We shall knead the moon
We shall finish our journey
Upon this beautiful day

Our siege is long

Today, the original pages on which Darwish and Bseiso wrote this poem, their scripts competing in red and blue across the page, are precariously preserved at the home of Bseiso's son in Gaza. As in previous rounds of the Israeli air war, he has carefully, if hurriedly, packed up his father's papers, including his drafts, notes, letters, and his books and pens. He has wrapped in blankets the paintings of and for Muin that usually reside proudly upon the walls of his Gazan apartment. He has deposited this archive of one of Palestine's great writers in a handful of suitcases at his front door. He wonders how he'll get it all down the dozen or so floors between him and the street. His wife and children evacuated a few days ago to stay with family in the southern part of Gaza. And so he remains steadfast in the apartment alone, in the densely populated northern half of the Strip that the Israelis have condemned to destruction. Our siege is long.

That Muin Bseiso's papers have survived successive sieges across generations is a feat due to the efforts of the Palestinian organiser and teacher Sahbaa al-Barbari, Bseiso's wife. 'When we left Lebanon,' al-Barbari recounted in an interview with Ghada Ageel, 'we weren't able to take our belongings. People were only allowed one bag, and I tried to take as much as I could of Muin's articles, publications, and things he had handwritten, as well as literature and belongings.'

She goes on: 'I only took a very small number of photographs, ones that I was afraid would fall into Israeli hands, because it could be dangerous for the people in them. Later, our building porter who witnessed it told me that after we had left, Israeli soldiers burst into the house, took down a large photo of Muin, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and Yasser Arafat, which hung in the entrance of the house, and shot at it.'

To know Palestinian history is to experience endless déjà vu. Every testament to the Palestinian condition speaks indelibly to the present. This is not only because their opponents persist in seeking their dispossession and death, but also because those opponents shamelessly maintain the same idioms of justification. Bseiso was not a historian by trade – he studied literature at the American University in Cairo, printing in the underground, and poetry in prison – but Gaza is a place with a paucity of history, and his memoirs, which accounted for the Gaza he knew, are some of the best histories of the place we have. His *Gaza Diaries* (1971) and *Palestinian Notebooks* (1978) are indispensable accounts of modern Palestinian history. Born in Gaza's Shuja'iyya neighbourhood in 1926, Bseiso knew the city from the inside out. His was Palestinian history on its own terms.

In their joint poem, Bseiso and Darwish write that our history is rain, *tarikhina matar*, eroding stone. In countless articles throughout his life – and indeed much of his writing is occasional and uncollected, short editorials and reviews scattered among Beirut's and Cairo's Arab weeklies and dailies – Bseiso would criticise Western writing on Gaza. He would, as in a 1979 article for Beirut's *Al-Usbu Al-Arabi* ('The Arab Week'), liken journalists in Gaza to tourists, eager for blood and merely repeating the same old story, never seriously considering Gaza's past.

In his *Gaza Diaries*, Bseiso would write critically of the new humanitarian regime inaugurated after 1948: 'The program of annihilating the Palestinian Red Indians in the new concentration camps in the Gaza Strip supervised by UNRWA didn't follow the old traditional methods of genocide.' In 1956, the Israelis occupied the Strip for the first time. Bseiso wrote that the Israeli assault on Gaza 'had the aim of burning the history of Palestine, its culture, and even its topography'. In describing the Israeli occupation of Gaza, Bseiso also identifies a genealogy of colonial war. The Israeli Army, he recounts, used to mark condemned homes with white chalk, 'to allow the occupants a few minutes to take out what they could. In most cases,' he continued, 'the inhabitants were forcibly driven out of the

house and forced to witness their house collapse and transform into a heap of broken wood, stone, iron and glass. Beneath the rubble, everything they owned.’

Last week, I spent an hour speaking with Muin’s son about his father. Shortly after we ended our call, I saw on Twitter that his building had been attacked and was in flames. When my calls wouldn’t go through, I feared the worst. On my tenth try, the phone finally rang and my shaken friend answered. The apartment next door to his had been hit. He had grabbed three of the bags with the most precious of his father’s materials and hurried down the stairs. He wasn’t sure if it was just a warning missile and if the building would be levelled soon, or if that was the end of it. He worried that the fire would spread to his family’s apartment.

The apartment survived and so has the archive, once again. Our siege is long.

We know who made the hell Palestinians live in today. Who will unmake that hell? And who will watch silently or cheer as its depths are made deeper and its people burn hotter?

‘Two Gazan Girls Dreaming of Peace’ by Malak Mattar, 2020.

On 27 October 2023 in the literary magazine Public Books*, US-Palestinian historian Esmat Elhalaby introduced a poem written jointly under fire in Beirut in 1982 by Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), Palestine’s national poet, and the Gaza-born writer and political activist Muin Bseiso (1926–84). This is an extract from Elhalaby’s essay.*

Mahmoud Darwish

SILENCE FOR THE SAKE OF GAZA

She wraps explosives around her waist and blows herself up.

It is not a death, and not a suicide.

It is Gaza's way of declaring she is worthy of life.

For four years Gaza's flesh has been torn into shrapnel flying in all directions.

It is not magic, and it is not a miracle.

It is Gaza's weapon for defending herself and exhausting the enemy.

For four years the enemy had been delighted with his dreams, fascinated by his dalliance with time, except in Gaza because Gaza is far from her kin and sits right up against the enemy. Because Gaza is an island: every time she erupts – and she is always erupting – she lacerates the face of the enemy, breaks up his dreams, and obstructs his contentment with time. Because time in Gaza is something else: time in Gaza is not a neutral element. Gaza does not propel people to cool contemplation; rather she propels them to erupt and collide with the truth. Time there does not lead children directly from childhood to old age, but it does make men of them upon the first encounter with the enemy. Time in Gaza does not allow you to let go; rather it is an attack upon a blistering noon because values in Gaza are different. Different. Different. The only values that an occupied person can espouse are those of resistance to occupation. This is the only competition there. Familiarity with these noble and hard values has become a need in Gaza. Her people did not acquire this need from books, or from brief academic courses, or from trumpets blaring propaganda, or from

patriotic songs. Only from experience did Gaza learn these values, and from actions not performed for the sake of one's image or self-promotion.

Gaza does not show off her weapons, her revolutionary zeal, or her balance sheet. She offers her bitter flesh, follows her own will and pours out her blood.

Gaza has not mastered the orator's art. Gaza has no throat. The pores of her skin speak in sweat, blood and fire.

As a result the enemy hates her enough to kill, is afraid enough to commit crimes and tries to sink her in the sea, in the desert or in blood.

Therefore her friends and relations love her with a feeling of shame that touches on jealousy, or even fear sometimes, because Gaza is the savage lesson and radiant model for enemies and friends alike.

Gaza is not the most beautiful of cities.

Her coast is not bluer than those of other Arab cities.

Her oranges are not the best in the Mediterranean.

Gaza is not the richest of cities.

(Fish and oranges and sand and tents forsaken by the winds, smuggled goods and hands for hire.)

And Gaza is not the most polished of cities, or the largest. But she is equivalent to the history of a nation, because she is the most repulsive among us in the eyes of the enemy – the poorest, the most desperate and the most ferocious. Because she is a nightmare. Because she is oranges that explode, children without a childhood, aged men without an old age and women without desire. Because she is all that, she is the most beautiful among us, the purest, the richest and the one most worthy of love.

We are unfair to her when we search for her poems. Let us not disfigure the beauty of Gaza. The most beautiful thing in her is that she is free of poetry at a time when the rest of us tried to gain victory with poems. We believed ourselves and rejoiced when we saw that the enemy had left us alone to sing our songs while we left victory for him. When we dried the poems from our lips we saw that the enemy had already built entire cities, forts and highways.

It would be unfair to turn Gaza into a legend because we will end up hating her when we discover she is nothing more than a small, poor city that resists. And when we ask, ‘What has made her into a legend?’, we will have to break our mirrors and cry if we have any dignity, or curse her if we refused to rebel against ourselves.

It would be unfair to Gaza to glorify her because our fascination will make us wait for her. But Gaza will not come to us. Gaza will not liberate us. Gaza does not have horses, or jet fighters, or magic wands, or offices in capitals. Gaza frees herself of our attributes, our language and of her conquerors all at once. And when we run into her, once upon a dream, she may not recognise us because she was born of fire while we were born of waiting and crying over our homes.

True, Gaza has her special circumstances and her own revolutionary traditions.

(We say this not to dissect but to disintegrate.)

The secret of Gaza is no mystery: her masses are united in popular resistance. She knows what she wants: to drive the enemy out of her hair. In Gaza the relation between resistance and the masses is that of the flesh to the bone, and not that of the teacher to the student.

In Gaza resistance has not become a salaried position.

And in Gaza resistance has not become an institution.

She does not accept supervision from anyone, and she does not allow her destiny to hang on anyone’s stamp or signature.

It does not matter to her very much whether or not we know her name, or recognise her image or oratorical skills. She does not believe she is photogenic or a media event. She does not make ready for the camera with a smile plastered on her face.

That is not what she wants, and not what we want.

Gaza’s wound has not been changed into a platform for orators. What is beautiful about Gaza is that we do not discuss her much, and we do not perfume the smoke of her dreams with the feminine fragrance of our lyrics.

Thus, Gaza would make a losing bet for the bookmakers. And for this very reason Gaza is a moral and spiritual treasure of incalculable worth for

all Arabs.

What is beautiful about Gaza is that our voices do not reach her. Nothing diverts her attention. Nothing turns her fist away from the face of the enemy: not the kind of Palestinian state that we will establish on the eastern side of the moon, or the western side of Jupiter after it has been mapped, or the distribution of seats in the National Council. Nothing diverts her attention. She is dedicated to rejection. Hunger and rejection. Thirst and rejection. Dispersion and rejection. Torture and rejection. Siege and rejection. Death and rejection.

The enemy may defeat Gaza. (The stormy sea might overwhelm a small island.)

They might cut down all her trees.

They might break her bones.

They might plant their tanks in the bellies of her women and children, or they might toss her into the sand, into the sea, into blood.

But:

Gaza will not repeat the lies.

Gaza will not say yes to the conquerors.

And she will continue to erupt.

It is not death and it is not suicide, it is Gaza's way of announcing she is worthy of life.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) is Palestine's national poet. This prose poem, written four years after the war of 1967, appeared in Yawmiyyat Al-Huzn Al-Adi *(Dar al-Awda, 1973), translated by Ibrahim Muhawi as* Journal of an Ordinary Grief *(Archipelago Books, 2010).*

Raji Sourani and Issam Younis

PURSUING JUSTICE

Raji Sourani: I started work in the legal sector in Gaza in 1977. I come from a very legal family: there are thirty-eight of us who work as lawyers, attorneys, judges, paralegals and so on, going back decades.

Until 1948, Palestine had two legal systems: Ottoman laws addressing civil affairs – marriage, inheritance, and so on – and an English system dealing with trade, business, property and criminal law. Beside this were Islamic Sharia courts, church courts and Jewish courts. The most significant legal instrument was (and is) the British emergency regulations of 1945, which introduced measures including military courts, censorship, house demolitions, curfews and extensive powers of search. It was adopted into Israeli law and remains in force today.

After 1948 Gaza was administered by Egypt, which meant Egyptian military decrees operated alongside British and Ottoman laws. Then from 1967 until the Oslo Accords in 1993, Gaza's Israeli military governor issued 1,158 military orders that overrode all these structures, forming the supreme legal authority intervening in many areas of people's lives.

The Oslo Agreement stated that the West Bank and Gaza Strip form one single territorial unit, but Israel's military laws contradict this, by denying freedom of movement between them, for instance. Perhaps the worst outcome of Oslo has been that Israel's military orders were not rescinded and remain in force. Israel has since promulgated new laws that exclude certain ethnicities, applying only to Israeli Jews. It's a mishmash of complicated and contradictory legal authorities.

Issam Younis: The nature of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is a major source of legal confusion, since it is neither a state nor merely a municipality. In Gaza between 1993 and Israeli disengagement in 2005, the PA was theoretically able to introduce new laws – but it had no power to change or overrule Israel's military orders. Israel was the legal authority, and it remained so after 2005, despite having no troops on the ground. The legal status of occupation was unchanged.

RS: After Oslo there was an attempt to merge the remnants of the Jordanian legal system that applied in the West Bank with what prevailed in Gaza, but it quickly turned chaotic. France, Britain and the US competed to exert influence on any emerging Palestinian legal structure. Discussions began on drafting a constitution – prematurely, in my view, since neither borders, capital nor sovereignty had been decided. A Palestinian Bill of Rights would have been more appropriate at that stage.

IY: The processes were out of sync with each other. Not only were laws not harmonised between the West Bank and Gaza, but the whole premise behind Oslo of unifying the Palestinian territory was being bypassed. Palestine still suffers from this over-complex web of jurisdictions. In addition, we had to think long and hard about whether to engage with Israel's military courts and help people seek redress, or to boycott them as an illegal imposition.

RS: By the mid-1990s we were starting to experience huge influence of political authority over judicial authority. In the early days of the PA in Gaza there was explicit interference: we were constantly getting calls from the political establishment. I must have taken five or six hundred cases to

the high court on behalf of political prisoners – but even when the judge was courageous enough to issue a release order, I would arrive at the prison with the paper in my hand only for the warden to tell me he couldn't release anyone without a phone call from Arafat's office.

It may be surprising, but I would say Hamas managed to rebuild Gaza's legal system to quite an acceptable level. Their political leadership was also wise enough to resist popular calls to interfere in the judiciary, particularly on social issues. Ordinary people in Gaza retained a belief that the legal system, even with Hamas in government and even under all its constraints, was, at least to some extent, delivering justice.

IY: When Hamas took over the courts in Gaza, they employed people who were not necessarily the best qualified for the job. Political appointees are another way to undermine judicial independence. It was a rough start, but people learned and improved: knowledge and experience deepened over time. Nevertheless, Gaza's legal system belongs to a political party that has a virtual monopoly on power. That inevitably raises questions around accountability, since the same people are responsible for implementation and oversight.

RS: Work on applying international law and international humanitarian law to the Palestinian struggle began with the establishment in 1979 of Al-Haq in Ramallah and the work of Raja Shehadeh, and later our office, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), in Gaza. The expansion of settlements at that time, as well as issues around political prisoners and torture, made us think there must be channels where we can seek justice beyond the internal legal structures of the state of Israel.

As our work expanded, we started to network with international lawyers and human rights defenders, even inside Israel. Bodies such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International came to meet us. We started to

understand better how to utilise legal avenues. We looked back at how international law was created and how it addressed past injustices, including for Jewish people after World War II, to gauge the space in which we could operate. It was clear that diplomacy was not delivering, and many saw how international legal frameworks could be used to support national political goals.

Four universities in Gaza teach law. Logic suggests that a student of law witnessing the unfairness and injustice of life here would be thrown into despair. It's astonishing to me to see how engaged and motivated Gazan law graduates are, how committed they are to the work. Around sixty-five people work in my office [the PCHR], plus another twenty part-time. We are not doing field work but rather legal documentation, confirming and validating testimony, cross-checking with experts and multiple witnesses, following up on casualties with the hospitals. Everything has to be correct. We are building complete files to assist the international courts which, ultimately, is where we want to take these cases.

IY: In Gaza, being a lawyer is not well paid and lacks prestige. Law schools have low barriers to entry, so you see mixed abilities among students. Universities consider law cheap to deliver – it requires only a lecture hall, no laboratories or special equipment – so courses are over-subscribed. Gaza's isolation means students graduate having learned little about legal systems around the world, and then must compete for a limited number of internships. Many are unemployed.

Having worked at Al-Haq and PCHR, where the focus was on political rights – prisoners, settlements, land – I started Mezan in 1999 to look at social rights: education, health, gender-based discrimination and so on. One of our initiatives was how to address accountability in the absence of proper political authorities and a representative parliament. We would invite, say, a mayor to take questions from an audience in a public forum, creating debate and then following up afterwards on issues raised.

Mezan has around thirty employees year-round, plus part-time staff. We are, inevitably, targeted nonstop with insults and harassment. The backbone of our work is field research: as a human rights body you cannot depend on resources that are not your own. Everything you produce must be verified and cross-checked and referenced: the organisation's first mistake will be its last. Our field workers document infringements of human rights, regardless of the perpetrator – which in Gaza is particularly fraught, since perpetrators could be the Israeli government, the Hamas government, the PA, which still has agency, or any of several non-state actors. It's a phenomenally pressured environment in which to work – though there are lighter moments. People here are pepper-eaters. They love chilli. It's a Gazan weak spot. If you want to win someone over, peppers are your entry point. So before I start gathering serious testimony from witnesses, one of the ways I break the ice with these people who have had to flee their homes and are perhaps injured, and often bereaved, is to ask, 'How are you managing the pepper situation?' Recently I was visiting a Gazan lady in one of the hospitals in Egypt. She leaned over, opened a cupboard and brought out this big jar of peppers she had been slicing and pickling. 'Since I'm sitting here, I've been doing this,' she said proudly. It's a reminder of people's humanity and simplicity – but also of their willingness to resist displacement. People keep the markers of home close by, despite all the hardships they are suffering.

Our offices in Jabalia, Gaza and Rafah have been damaged, but people are still working out of all three. Mezan has advisory consultant status with the UN, which creates a connection – often jointly with Al-Haq and PCHR – to UN bodies working on human rights and also to the International Criminal Court. That's a sign of our credibility, and it adds to the pressure to keep our data scrupulously accurate.

RS: Operating in international legal forums helps you understand which cases are strong, which are weak, and why. You see where your chances lie. That made me realise that documentation must be unimpeachable, you must

build your case correctly – and you have to exhaust all local remedies before moving to universal jurisdiction [in which a national court may prosecute a breach of international law] and then to international institutions. We tried bringing cases to national courts in Europe, but, by 2013 or so, we were getting the message that political institutions were placing limits on how far we could go. In the UK we made some progress, but then out of nowhere they changed the law and our case ground to a halt. In Spain, we had positive results but then a government minister did a U-turn, and we were out in the cold again.

So we went to the International Criminal Court (ICC), but that raised its own issues. We found ourselves having to negotiate internally with the PA to ensure they made no compromises or political trade-offs that would mean having to drop cases. We were briefing Palestinian politicians one by one about international jurisdiction and the advantages to the national project of operating in international legal institutions.

I believe in these institutions, and I believe that they will deliver justice to the Palestinian people. I also believe that the peace process can and should develop, but it must not involve signing away legal responsibilities or the rights of individuals to redress under the law. Peace should not override justice, nor vice versa. They are twin tracks. At the International Court of Justice, South Africa made history on 11 January 2024 by standing with us to demand justice in a war situation urgently requiring international legal intervention.

IY: Justice is not often achieved quickly. It is a slow, cumulative process. We cannot end the occupation by flicking a switch. It will be the result of collective work in different fields and complementary channels over years and years. Justice is a beautiful concept, but reality often leaves me pessimistic: it is difficult to imagine Netanyahu in the dock, but we have to keep focus and maintain momentum.

In 2012, we gained observer status at the UN. In 2014, we became a party to the Rome Statute of the ICC and followed up by supplying lots of documentation until they opened their investigation in 2021. Then, on 20 May 2024, the ICC chief prosecutor filed applications for arrest warrants. This has been a hugely significant strategic process – and, I should add, it would not have happened without the support we have seen from student movements, street protests and other expressions of solidarity shown to the Palestinian people around the world. We are using the legal framework available to people under oppression that the world created after World War II – or, rather, that the victors created. It is not perfect, but it creates space within which to operate. These laws should be revised, to enable the oppressed to end injustice more quickly, but this is what is available to us now. Our cause is real and just, and it deserves international attention.

It took time to get here. The illegality was obvious from 1967, but it took this long – especially in the context of constant crises – to build our own capacity. Palestinian society has not been allowed to undergo natural progression.

This is also a double-headed process: we should be looking internally at how we might use these legal instruments to improve our own human rights record. Signing international agreements is an opportunity for us to redress injustices at home.

I wholeheartedly believe that justice will prevail. Victims, sadly, sometimes don’t see justice in their lifetimes, but collectively we, the Palestinian people, will see justice. However, justice cannot undo what’s been done. The pain will stay. And we should be firm in resisting populist narratives around justice as revenge. Justice is the most honourable of human values. Our national vision should be based on a concept of justice as a high moral principle. We, as Palestinians, need to unpack these terms and establish what justice means to us. Whatever the practical details of a future state might be, it must be founded on principles of fairness and equality for all under the law. We need to take back the initiative.

Lawyer Raji Sourani is director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Gaza. He has won numerous global rights awards and was an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience while jailed by Israel. Issam Younis directs the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza. Both spoke separately in May 2024 from displacement in Egypt; we have combined their answers.

Naim Al Khatib

ON WAR AND SHIT

Dear World,
I am a Palestinian man who lives in the neighbourhood of Tal al-Hawa (or Hill of the Wind) in Gaza City. I get so exasperated when people misspell my address by replacing the extended form of the letter *alif* at the end of ‘hawa’ with the broken form, thereby turning Tal al-Hawa into the Hill of Passion. This, I gather, has provoked some to change the name of the area to ‘Great Islam Hill’. What annoys me is the ‘Great’: if the adjective refers to Islam it is tautologous, but if it refers to the hill it’s hyperbolic.

The night, or the day, as my young daughter would say, that the [2014] war tightened its grip around the neck of our neighbourhood, Dina asked me, ‘Baba, why did they make it all daytime?’ The truth is that my intelligence got in the way of understanding her question, and when I asked for an explanation, she clarified: ‘Because they don’t let us sleep.’

We were close to thirty people, brought together by coincidence, or some unannounced collusion, at the home of our Christian neighbour, who happens to be the only Christian in the building or maybe in the whole area. None of us expressed any objection, especially later when we clustered around the sweets left over from the holiday of St Barbara.

When my eyes met those of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall, I reassured her and stressed that the misunderstanding was mutual.

After a rapid security sweep, we gathered in one corner of the dark kitchen. Under missile strikes, the whizzing of bullets and the shaking building, the summation of our existence transpired as two connected ideas:

the fear of death and the need to go to the bathroom. Many of us know that water makes up three-quarters of the human body, but few of us are aware that the entirety of this amount flows into the bladder at times like these.

The suicide missions of taking our children back and forth to the bathroom did not cease, even though the trip required crossing an area in the line of fire that faced the big glass balcony overlooking the street. A person would stand and hold their little one, taking cover and waiting for an opportunity to dart forward like an arrow. In the bathroom, the army was only a half-opened glass window away and the sound of their machinery was enough to shorten all protocols. As for the return, it was a reverse trip not without anticipation and euphoria for those waiting their turn.

Why, in situations like these, do the principles of architecture, the fundamentals of interior design, the rules of public health and the recommendations of environmental experts all fail us when we have a basic functional need as simple as having a bathroom in the kitchen? The call of nature did not stop; rather it became a continuous scream. I decided to take the initiative and accept my new responsibility as the group's shit engineer. I searched the kitchen cupboards for an appropriate receptacle, emptied a bucket and placed it behind the kitchen table. I then lowered the tablecloth to the floor as a curtain, proudly announcing to the group the official opening of the new kitchen bathroom. Children under ten expressed their happiness about the idea and began practising their tasks standing, sitting and even without a chaperone.

Of course the new bathroom did not solve everyone's problem, mine included. The need to go was heightened by the degree of risk-taking. When it was my turn, I traversed the miles separating the kitchen and the bathroom and did what I had to do with a speed that baffled me. I do not know whether it was because of fear, the flow of adrenaline or the mind's superior ability to control our limbs at a given moment.

After hours of army control over the neighbourhood, the raging war calmed and shit was no longer the master of the situation. The women enjoyed staying in the master bedroom that had its own bathroom. We men were left with a separate bathroom, but the trip there was no longer as

dangerous. We deliberated over less pressing matters such as providing food and blankets and determining the locations and hours of sleep. Some began designing white flags in case we were asked to leave. We argued over the need to keep the door open for fear of getting it blown off should the army enter. Some even went so far as to joke about looking for a prayer mat in our friend's home. My eyes met once again with those of the Virgin Mary, and I thought this time she was smiling from her place on the wall. The mutual misunderstanding still stands. And as for shit, it has returned to chasing us like a ghost of, or a refrain for, a war that has not finished yet.

Riding the waves, Gaza, 2005.

Writer and actor Naim Al Khatib was born in 1968 in Rafah camp to a refugee family from al-Qubaiba village, west of Ramleh. He studied in Egypt and the US. His published works in Arabic include Free Reign *(2010) and* Stolen Alive *(2013). In 2023 he lost twenty members of his extended family and was displaced from his home in Gaza City with his wife and five children, first to Rafah, then Egypt, then Canada. This piece is taken from the edited volume* Gaza as Metaphor *(Hurst, 2016).*

Sara Roy

SHATTERING THE MIRROR

I have long been warned about making any kind of comparison between the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Some friends have told me, some screaming at me, that I weaken my argument with such comparisons and de-legitimise myself. More importantly, they say, I defile the memory of the six million – among whom are my grandparents, aunts and uncles – by invoking their names alongside Palestinian ones.

I listen to their arguments very carefully because I am a child of survivors and my family history is one I would never knowingly dishonour. My mother and father survived Auschwitz among other horrors. My life has been defined by the Holocaust and the unimaginable losses it inflicted on our family (throughout my life I heard stories about individuals I came to love but never knew). Yet, with those losses came lessons that were drummed into me by my parents, lessons burned into my soul, which I promised never to forget. The Holocaust is not a shield beyond which you cannot look, my mother and father taught me; rather, it is a mirror with which to reflect and examine your actions, a mirror you must always carry with you.

While there is no equivalence between the Holocaust and the occupation – just as there is no equivalence between the occupier and the occupied – there are parallels. After nearly fifty years of occupation, twenty-one years of closure, eight years of blockade and three wars waged against it in six years – Gaza pleads for those parallels to be made.

Today, Gaza finds itself in an unknown and precarious place, deprived of the ordinary and comprehensible. Perhaps for the first time since the occupation began, Palestinians in Gaza see no horizon or future beyond the panorama of destruction that now confronts them. Over my three decades of involvement with Gaza, I have witnessed the deliberate and purposeful disablement of this vibrant place and its gentle people – and now its large-scale destruction. And I continue to ask myself, why? Yet, among all the stories that Gazans could tell, one continues to preoccupy them more than all the others – an entreaty that still remains unheard: the quest for human dignity.

This quest is constant and unrelenting, as ferocious in its insistence as are the attempts by Israel to extinguish it. There is a voice that has always been present through all my years of research among Palestinians and it speaks these words: we, too, are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, professors and lawyers, fishermen and factory workers. We, too, are human beings with individual histories and stories that must be recounted by the living, not only buried with the dead.

Gaza is a place, Israel argues, where innocent civilians do not exist. The presence of such civilians in Gaza is suspect, they say, because Palestinians elected a terrorist organisation to represent them. Retired Israeli Major General Giora Eiland stated, '[T]hey [the citizens of Gaza] are to blame for this situation just like Germany's residents were to blame for electing Hitler as their leader and paid a heavy price for that, and rightfully so.' According to this logic there is no such thing as a civilian home, school, hospital, mosque, church or playground in Gaza; all these places are therefore legitimate targets of Israeli bombs since every home is a non-home, every kindergarten a non-kindergarten, and every hospital a non-hospital.

That the area being bombed is urban with over 20,000 human beings per square kilometre does not weigh on the majority of Jewish people. That my friends and their children were among those being bombed, people who have always welcomed me as a Jew into their homes in Gaza, is of no consequence. For Major General Eiland and for too many others, there are no parents in Gaza, there are no children, there are no deaths to mourn.

Gaza is a place where words are mimed and screams are mute. Even the wars against Gaza are silent: soundless tanks, soundless drones, soundless bombs. Rather, Gaza is where the grass grows wild and must be mowed from time to time.

The desolation inflicted on Gaza is powerfully seen in the almost complete destruction of Khuzaa in 2014, a village once known as Gaza's orchards. Writes a UN colleague:

> Khuzaa was very difficult. There are whole stretches with every dwelling smashed, and untouched land between them. People are living in two-and three-walled rooms. … I can't begin to imagine the impact of staring at jagged wreckage day after day. … What had been a lively neighbourhood has been reduced, so suddenly, to complete dependence. They fell through the floor of any kind of humane standard … there is a fragility in these areas that I find frightening.

The devastation of Khuzaa (and Beit Hanoun, Shuja'iyya, Beit Lahia) conceals an even greater theft that has been imposed on Palestinians, especially in Gaza: the desecration of daily life. Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian writes that Palestinians live in 'a zone of non-existence' where one finds 'new spaces of obscenity in the politics of day-to-day lives'. These obscene spaces are defined by a maimed reality where engaging in normal, everyday acts of living and working – building a home, going to school, visiting relatives, planting a tree, playing in a park or sitting on a beach – are treated as criminal activities, punishable even by death.

One of the most powerful works of Holocaust literature I have read is Yehiel De-Nur's *Shivitti: A Vision*. He signed this book, as he did his others,

not with his name but with the number he was given in Auschwitz: Ka-Tzetnik 135633 (‘ka-tzet’ being the pronunciation in German of the abbreviation K.Z., standing for ‘concentration camp’; ‘nik’ denotes affiliation). He did so in memory of every camp inmate who was known by such a number, the number itself branded into the flesh of the left arm, as was my father’s.

In what is perhaps the most memorable passage of the book, De-Nur describes how he hid in a coal bin inside a crematorium truck, which was parked and locked in a garage. He relives the moment when he escaped from the truck: covered in coal dust, he encounters a stunned garage superintendent who is an SS officer, and screams at him, ‘I’m a human being. No evil spirit! No demon! I am human and I want to live! I am a human being! Human!’ – words I hear cried in Gaza, words meant to affirm existence and self-worth.

How can I not think of the innocents murdered in Gaza, alongside my relatives? Refusing any such association or bond, as I have been told I must do, is not only the end of Holocaust consciousness, it is the end of Jewish ethical history – shattering the mirror I promised my parents always to use.

American economist Sara Roy is a senior research scholar on the Middle East at Harvard University. She has written widely since the 1980s on Gaza’s economy and society, including several books and hundreds of articles in outlets from the Journal of Palestine Studies *to* Le Monde Diplomatique. *This piece is taken from the edited volume* Gaza as Metaphor *(Hurst, 2016).*

Tahani Ghayad

MY HUMDRUM DAYS

I didn’t realise that all my humdrum days before would seem like paradise.

I close my eyes and go back to the way I used to be, before the war. I remember the laughter, the meetings with friends, the boring commute to university, my dream of working at the thing I do best … How I miss it. How nostalgic I am for days that will never return.

I used to wake up at 5am every day so that I could catch the bus from Rafah to Gaza City, where I went to university on al-Rashid Street. It’s a long ride, but not exhausting. It was easy and I quite enjoyed it. I wasn’t that person who hates waking up early and then spends ages complaining about how long their journey is. Not me! I would put on my headphones and listen to the Nightingale [iconic Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez] the whole way and look out of the bus window at the Gaza sea.

How can you understand what the Gaza sea meant? It was our only escape and our reason for living. I used to love gazing at it, as if the sea were reciprocating my emotion, soothing my soul and comforting me.

As soon as I arrived at uni, I would search for my friends so we could head to the lecture hall together. Then, when hunger struck, our feet would take us to the famous Falafel Soussi in al-Rimal, or the Zahran restaurant. If we’re weren’t pressed for time, we would go to Abu Zuhair’s opposite the Omari Mosque for pastries and mint tea. From there, we passed by the Zawiya souk, which reminds me of the markets of Jerusalem: just the aroma takes me on a journey back into history, to a time before the occupation. It gives me a nostalgic feeling of home. Being among the older generations

reminds me of my grandfather – may God have mercy on him – as if their wrinkled faces were his. They lived through the Nakba [1948] and the Naksa [1967] together. And when I felt down, I would go to Gaza's port and sit for hours by myself, letting the waves wash my worries away as they came into the shore and then receded.

That's just a flavour of my day. I also took part in lots of projects and community activities. I'm a volunteer who loves my community. That hasn't changed.

Now every day is the same, but that's not how it used to be. Friday is like a holy day here, a day of leisure for all the people of Gaza. My family would sit down together for a big lunch – maftoul, for example, a sort of Palestinian couscous – and then in the afternoon we would visit my grandmother – may God have mercy on her – and my beloved aunt. On Saturday mornings I would sometimes wander round the market in Rafah with my mother. Every city in the Gaza Strip has one day a week dedicated to a market full of merchants and tempting bargains. Our walk would end with a cold drink of something refreshing and a whole lot of shopping to bring home.

I've been best friends with Yasmeen and Heba since childhood. We tell each other everything about our day, all mixed up together. We laugh a lot and hug each other more. We remember our childhood days when we quarrelled, and we take hundreds of pictures so we don't forget anything. We visit each other even now, together until death.

I graduated two weeks before the war with an honours degree in accounting, which made up for all those long hours spent in university halls. I found work as a content writer to help me develop my writing skills, but the war denied me the opportunity to celebrate my graduation. A week before the war I lost my father, the most important person I had in the

world. I'll never be able to hear him say, 'You're the daughter I'm most proud of' again.

And because of the terrible war we have been enduring for months now, my university has been destroyed. My heart broke when I saw it happening. It hurts how all the places we spent so much time in have been reduced to ashes, how the road to the university buildings is in ruins, how it was all lost when the city was mutilated. There's no longer a port for me to retreat to when the world presses in. There's no longer the Zawiya souk, nor even my beloved Omari Mosque. I am grieving for 'Hashem's Gaza', our Gaza that we love. The enemy destroyed that which is most dear to me, and now I am waiting for the war to end so that I can go back, while my tongue recites a verse – peace for Gaza, peace.

Tahani Ghayad is a content writer at the Mayasem Association for Culture and Arts, near Khan Yunis in southern Gaza. She contributed this memoir in April 2024.

Zainab Bashir

SLEEP AND REPEAT

I’m twenty-two. I recently graduated from university. I used to work as a translator, but after the attacks on Gaza I lost my job, like so many others.

I used to wake up early for translation training I would attend with Dr Refaat Alareer, who was killed by the Israeli forces. I would get up at eight, have breakfast, and put my headphones on in the car on my way to the university. I listened to a podcast or music, and looked out at the sea from the car window. The ride was very beautiful. It gave me the best morning, looking at the sea and the people out running. Then training would be so productive and fun, because Dr Refaat was an amazing teacher. We learned a lot from him.

I would come home happy, or I would walk around Gaza, get some coffee and chat with friends in the streets. They’re all gone now. At home I would do some translation work and assignments if I had any, then either sit with my family or watch shows on my iPad. I would go to sleep and repeat.

On 7 October 2023, I was in my bedroom. I still had my makeup on from my brother’s wedding the night before. I had planned to tidy my room and take my makeup off.

I didn’t need to read about the attack or for anyone to tell me about it. I knew about it as soon as I opened my eyes. I had wanted to sleep in because I was tired after the wedding. Instead, I woke up to the sounds of bombing. What is happening? I wondered. I was at a wedding yesterday. Is it some kind of celebration?

I was confused. I was so scared. I was disappointed, because that's not how I wanted my day to start. I started to wonder what would happen to our lives. To my training. To the scholarships I was applying for. I started to think about how everything might go and whether I'd be able to continue with my life or not. Questions rushed to my head as I heard the bombing in the early morning.

Now, my daily routine is in tatters. I have lost my university. I have lost my very dear teacher and trainer. I have lost everything that I used to do. Now I just sleep, wake up, watch the news, get stressed, hear bombings and sleep again, if I am able to. Nights are mostly sleepless because of the bombings and the stress. And that's pretty much it. I don't have a routine. I'm just sitting here, waiting for this to end, or for me to die the next minute, the next hour. I'm waiting for my fate.

Zainab Bashir spoke to Vinícius Assis for Hammer and Hope *in December 2023 and January 2024.*

Ebraheem Matar

WILL I?

About the feeling of seeing your city that you love falling, seeing the streets that you love being destroyed, the places that you love and the sea that you love, and seeing your friends and loved ones falling one after the other, without anyone helping them. All of this is enough to destroy your heart, and make you numb from the intense pain and bewilderment. Oh God, this is too much.

My dream was to live a normal life in Gaza, like any person in the world who lives in the place where he was born. I was happy at home, with work, in cafés, and with friends. That was more than sufficient. I cherished my closeness to my father, mother, siblings, trees and the sea. I hated the thought of exile and did not wish to experience it.

I wonder, will I survive and return to my beloved Gaza one day? Will I go back to doing the simple things I love?

Will I take long walks in its streets? Will I sit by the sea in the early hours of the morning to contemplate the vast blue sea and the wide sky above, knowing that the sky and the sea are our only connection to the outside world?

Will I listen to music with friends while talking, laughing and mocking the world until the morning comes?

Will I sit again in that café that serves that amazing coffee and magical Nutella cake, and feel like I am in the most beautiful city in the world? Will I go back to sitting with my mother by the sea to watch the sunset, to witness and celebrate the sun swimming in the sea – a sight that my mother

loves so much and calls the most beautiful scene in life? Will we walk at night on cold days to feel the light wind sting our cheeks and touch the raindrops with our hands?

Will we go back to slowly strolling in al-Rimal neighbourhood and enjoy the market on Omar al-Mukhtar Street? Will we return to our favourite meal: a falafel sandwich with hot sauce from al-Soussi, followed by lemon slush from Kazim Ice Cream?

Will we study again at the university, and then sit in al-Katiba Park to watch the bright greens of the grass and breathe in fresh air – our natural air-conditioning from the trees and the sea, as Uncle Abu Ahmad says, as he prepares tea for us?

Will men go back to Gaza port at six in the morning to buy fresh fish as soon as it comes out of the sea?

Will I go back to walking in the mornings by the sea without being caught by any missile?

Will we return to walking in the streets without fear of stumbling upon a corpse, or a broken tree, or a building reduced to rubble?

Will we even know how to walk on a street paved with smooth asphalt instead of broken rocks?

Oh God, will we wake up from the long nightmare of war and return to Gaza?

Ebraheem Matar is a doctor who worked in the intensive care unit at Gaza's al-Aqsa Hospital. This is collated from diary pieces written on 14 November and 24 December 2023, sourced from the website Passages Through Genocide.

Atef Alshaer

CARVING POSITIVE SPACES

Because of the isolation that’s been imposed on it, Gaza has developed a culture that is neither Egyptian nor exactly Levantine, though it has elements of both. You can hear that in the dialect, which is an amalgam of Palestinian and Egyptian Arabic – and you can see it in the food especially. I remember when shawarma first came to Rafah, in the late 1990s: we didn’t have it before. It’s a Levantine thing, so maybe they had it in Gaza City; I don’t know. Fish is not such an important part of culinary culture in the West Bank, but Gaza has fish dishes that are unique, like zibdiyit gambari, spicy prawn tagine. That’s very Gazan. Then there’s feseekh, dried, salted and fermented grey mullet. It’s totally Egyptian, eaten nowhere else – except in Gaza at Eid.

A man at the ‘shouting fence’, Rafah, 1984. The barbed-wire fence was installed through Rafah in 1982 to mark the border between Egypt and Palestine. Relatives on either side of the fence would gather to call to each other across the divide. In 2000, Israel began razing homes to create a buffer zone and built a border wall, ending the contact.

I was born in a peculiar year. Before 1982, there was no real border between Gaza and Egypt. But because of the agreements between Egypt and Israel that came into effect forty days after my birth, the international border was driven right through the middle of our house. I was actually born in Rafah, Egypt, but we were forced to choose which side to be on, so we moved to Rafah, Palestine. Some of my uncles stayed, though – I’ve never met them, but I remember as a child we would go to the border fence and shout across to them in Egypt through the barbed wire. We lost the house, of course.

My memories as a young child were shaped by the First Intifada. That’s when we were introduced to the idea of curfew, that we couldn’t be outside after 5 or 6pm, I forget which. That went on for a long time. It was deeply

frustrating. We hated it. Our house was about twenty minutes from the sea, but to get to the beach you had to pass through an Israeli settlement. That was another constant frustration, being stopped from going through. I remember we used to wait there for ages, kicking a football around, hoping the Israeli soldiers would open the settlement gate and let us pass, but very often they didn't, and we'd just go back home again. I also remember queuing to fetch water from a standpipe. Very often we would have to queue for bread. As children we thought that was just the natural order of things. We had no conception of life outside.

And the experience of injury and death was constant. Classmates from my school were killed. I was about eight when I saw a dead body for the first time – someone from my school, with blood on his face, being carried past everyone to the graveyard.

My father was born, like his father, in Beersheba. We were refugees to Gaza from there in 1948. But Alshaers are found all over, as far as Jordan and Syria. Some are Christian, some are Muslim. It seems to me my ancestors would have travelled around, and maybe they just happened to be in Beersheba. We were traders between the Bedouin and the urban middle classes, dealing in dairy, livestock, olives, and so on. That stayed in my family: my father was a shopkeeper, selling these sorts of groceries. His shop was hit by an Israeli missile in 2008. He had passed away long before, though.

We had no real idea about the outside world. I did go to Gaza City two or three times when I was young, but it didn't register much. We had a TV, but the picture was never clear. Every now and then someone from outside, speaking English, would come through, but we didn't relate to them at all. And Israelis were just soldiers. I grew up amid Bedouin culture. By that time the Bedouin were no longer nomadic, and there was so little open land around Rafah anyway, but families with Bedouin origins like Abu Sitta and Abu Ghaith would keep livestock. That was very familiar to me.

I loved the sea. I still do. Going to Rafah's beach with my family on a Friday in a big gathering, being outside with everyone as the sun went

down. When you're young you don't think about it, but those times are memories of togetherness and warmth that later I missed deeply.

I was an average student until I was about fifteen, when it dawned on me that I enjoyed learning. I started to study hard, and passed my exams with the best results in the whole district. It was all new to me – history, logic, psychology, philosophy. I read Dickens, I studied Freud, and somehow my inner world responded positively. But leaving to study at Birzeit University in the West Bank was very sad, and frightening. I missed the kindness, the generosity, Gaza's acerbic sense of humour. The landscape was huge. I'd never known any landscape other than Rafah, which is more or less flat sand, and when I saw the green hills around Ramallah, I thought the natural rocks were headstones in some giant cemetery. Studying at Birzeit added dimensions to my mind – as did meeting so many different people. One English family there told me that if I was accepted to study in London I would be welcome to stay with them. They were very kind to me, very sympathetic. I ended up living with them for thirteen years in Kensington, right in the middle of London. They eased my transition. They made the evolution in my understanding of the world simpler.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean for this emotion. Just give me a minute, please.

Generally, I'm quite a positive person. I've carved positive spaces for myself, my family and my students.

I love London – my family has grown up here, my mindset is in harmony with its cultures – and I have made a life for myself here. But Gaza is very dear to my heart. It has never left me. My spirit has always been anchored in the injustice that is being done to my birthplace. I've always rejected it and felt that I cannot capitulate to it. Now, with what's going on, I feel the pain even more acutely because I fear for my family in Palestine and their future.

To see this level of devastation – it's something the mind is not equipped to deal with. For there to be no horizon or endpoint is horrendous.

And potentially losing Gaza. This is our land. These are our people. They don’t deserve it. It’s a deep injury. I don’t know when it will heal. This pain is every day – you wake up, you look at the phone, you have no idea who is going to have been killed next. Homes destroyed. Livelihoods, too. We are facing decimation as a community.

Because Hamas did what it did on 7 October, you do this? You exploit a security event, big as it was, to destroy an entire nation?

The degree of Britain’s complicity with Israel and its genocidal system is extremely disturbing and raises a lot of questions within me, whether I want my children to stay here. In that sense, I feel alienated. The Palestinian community in the UK feels vulnerable and alone. But there are lots of fantastic people here who are against all this, there are good opportunities, very good libraries. Where else might we go? I have yet to process and comprehend the depth of my feelings. It’s ongoing, and it is deeply troubling.

Atef Alshaer was born in Rafah in 1982. He teaches Arabic language and culture at the University of Westminster in London, and contributes regularly to international media. His publications include A Map of Absence: Palestinian Writing on the Nakba *(Saqi Books, 2019) and* Language and National Identity in Palestine: Representations of Power and Resistance in Gaza *(2022). He was speaking in April 2024.*

There’s something about an airport. Air travel, still, implies freedom and modernity – or, rather, the lack of it implies backwardness and dependence. Nationhood demands airports. It may seem unlikely today, but only a few years have passed since it was possible to fly direct to Gaza International Airport from cities including Dubai and Istanbul. Major airlines operated regular schedules to Gaza, as did the national flag carrier Palestinian Airlines. Rub your eyes, but Gaza airport once hosted the president of the United States, who flew in and shook hands warmly with the president of the State of Palestine, as an honour guard played and a giant Stars and Stripes flew beside an equally large Palestinian flag.

Until Israel bombed it.

Ottoman Turkish forces built Gaza’s first airfield in 1917, south of Gaza City near what became the Karni crossing. Under the British it became ‘RAF Gaza’, both a military post and, from 1927, a refuelling stop for Imperial Airways between London and India. But it fell into disuse after 1948 and nothing remains today.

Since 1967, Israel has seized control of all land, sea and air routes in and out of the country. Dreams of restoring a direct link between Palestine and the outside world remained unrealised until the burst of optimism that surrounded the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The following year Yasser Arafat, new president of the Palestinian Authority, initiated a project to build an airport in the Gaza Strip, squeezed into an angle of border fences south of Rafah. The first plane – carrying Arafat himself, of course – landed on the freshly laid three-kilometre runway in June 1996.

But the Israeli government had to be forced to allow the airport to open. While Palestinian Airlines began flying from nearby Egyptian airfields, notably el-Arish, Israeli officials raised concerns about Gaza’s low handling charges eating into their control of cargo traffic, particularly agricultural exports. They feared Gaza’s potential as a transshipment point for arms.

They loathed the political capital that an airport handed to the Palestinian Authority and to Palestinians. It was only under US pressure, and on condition that Israeli inspectors be allowed to conduct security checks and approve passenger lists, that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally acceded, in October 1998.

Gaza's shiny new airport opened to the public on 24 November 1998, even before interiors and computer systems were ready. EgyptAir landed first, followed by seven more aircraft, including Palestinian Airlines. CBS News reported that 'a crowd of thousands [joined] celebrations.' Minister Saeb Erekat said: 'Until today, the term 'travel' has been absent from the Palestinian lexicon. From now on, we will be able to use it like everyone else.' Three weeks later the airport saw US president Bill Clinton flying in for a day of photo ops alongside Arafat.

The euphoria didn't last. Israel shut Gaza's airport – by then inevitably renamed Yasser Arafat International – in October 2000 at the outbreak of the Second Intifada, forcing Palestinian Airlines back to el-Arish (and eventually out of service). Then it bombed the control tower. In 2002, Israeli bulldozers tore up Gaza's runway. Today, the once-grand terminal building is a ruin, its fittings looted. Livestock roams the former airport grounds.

Yet Captain Zeyad al-Bada, who piloted the first arrival in 1996, remains hopeful. In 2020, he told Al Jazeera: 'I believe I will fly again from Gaza to the world.'

For roughly four hundred years until 1948, Gaza was a region, not a strip. The Gaza Subdistrict comprised almost 1,200 square kilometres under British rule in 1948, and included the cities of Gaza, Khan Yunis and al-Majdal (now Ashkelon) and their hinterlands. After the fighting of 1948–49 abated, Egypt took control of Gaza in a sliver of territory it had successfully defended. This sliver, further reduced by an Israeli-created buffer zone to 365 square kilometres, is what became known as the Gaza Strip.

Egypt directed the creation of the Gaza-based All-Palestine Government in 1948, but this was essentially a puppet regime whose writ did not extend beyond the Strip. After the 1952 revolution that brought the charismatic army officer Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, Egypt dissolved the All-Palestine Government, turning Gaza into an Egyptian territory under military occupation – though Nasser ‘encouraged Palestinian expression’, says Palestinian scholar Salman Abu Sitta.

Nasser’s anti-imperialist Pan-Arabism, urging Arab unity in a utopian ideal of borderless nationalism, brought Egypt into lockstep with many newly independent post-colonial states. India’s Prime Minister Nehru and President Tito of Yugoslavia had already declared in 1950 their non-alignment with the two emerging superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union. At a conference at Bandung in Indonesia in 1955, Nasser joined Nehru and other Asian and African heads of state to establish what became the Non-Aligned Movement, formalising global defiance of imperialism and European colonial power.

Gaza, as a thorn of revolutionary Egyptian-controlled territory in the side of US-backed Israel, and as the home of impoverished refugees dispossessed by a war of Zionist colonisation, gained sudden cachet. In 1959 the Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara arrived in Gaza at Nasser’s invitation, observing living conditions for the refugees and remarking, ‘This is the work of the *gringos* [the United States].’ The trip

was ‘momentous’, Abu Sitta says, for bringing the Nakba to global attention and opening the door to coordination between Cuban and Palestinian revolutionary movements.

As part of an Egyptian trip reinforcing non-aligned solidarity with Nasser, Nehru toured Gaza in 1960 – where he was buzzed by Israeli warplanes – and then, on 5 September 1964, Gaza hosted the US activist and icon of Black empowerment Malcolm X. During extensive travels throughout most of 1964 across the Middle East and Africa, Malcolm was seeking to broaden understanding within the civil rights movement in the US of liberation struggles around the world. He toured the Khan Yunis refugee camp, met community leaders, visited a local hospital, prayed in a local mosque. He also sat with the Gazan poet Haroun Hashim Rashid, who told of his escape from Israel’s massacre of 275 unarmed civilians in Khan Yunis in 1956. Malcolm copied a poem Rashid recited into his diary:

> We must return
> No boundaries should exist
> No obstacles can stop us
> Cry out refugees: ‘We shall return’
> Tell the mountains: ‘We shall return’
> Tell the alley: ‘We shall return’
> We are going back to our youth
> Palestine calls us to arm ourselves
> And we are armed and are going to fight
> We must return

Seeing the consequences of the Nakba at first hand and hearing directly from Palestinians using civil rights, Muslim identity and Black pride as tools of anti-imperialist resistance made a profound impression on Malcolm. The same month he wrote an essay ‘Zionist Logic’ for the *Egyptian Gazette*, backing the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, condemning Zionism as ‘a new form of colonialism’ and embracing

Nasser’s goal of Arab-African unity under socialism. After Malcolm’s assassination in New York only five months later, his stance was developed by Black campaigners in the US including Stokely Carmichael, who spoke in 1968 of his anti-Apartheid dream ‘of having coffee in South Africa and mint tea in Palestine’. Kwame Ture – as Carmichael became known – finally visited post-Apartheid South Africa in 1997 but died just over a year later, the second part of his dream unrealised.

Ghassan Kanafani

LETTER FROM GAZA, INTRODUCED BY HISHAM MATAR

In 2009, Hisham Matar – not yet forty – was already a celebrated writer. The success of The Return *(2016) lay ahead, but his first novel* In the Country of Men *had been published in 2006 to international acclaim. Following Israel's attack on Gaza in 2008–09, Matar wrote for the literary magazine* Granta *about an earlier writer's response to previous attacks.*

He began by describing the sense of being overwhelmed by news consumption to the point of mute paralysis. During a phone conversation with his mother, 'my eye fell on a name on my shelf: Ghassan Kanafani. I had not read him since boyhood. I flicked through the collection of short stories until I came upon one called Letter From Gaza.*'*

Matar continued:

> It is darkly unnerving how in that story, written when Kanafani was barely twenty, the author foresees the tragedy that would, years later, befall him and his niece. *Letter From Gaza* is written in the voice of a Palestinian who has returned to his destroyed neighbourhood. All he has left in Gaza after the assault are his mother, sister-in-law and her four children: '…but,' he tells his friend, the addressee, who is eagerly waiting in Sacramento, 'I would liberate myself from this last tie too, there in green California, far from the reek of defeat which for seven years had filled my nostrils.' He has been accepted at the University of California. He buys a 'pound of apples' for his wounded niece in hospital. The girl is inconsolable. Her wounds seem to reflect the new

geography of occupation. The short stay entirely alters his plans and he decides to remain instead in Gaza, ‘among the ugly debris’.

The mechanism by which the epistle leads its author (and the reader) to this conclusion reveals, with the inevitability of a natural process, the intimate reality of a man whose breath had been quartered by defeat. The prose has an air of being told in spite of its teller. Like all good letters it is not intended for anyone other than its recipient. Writing a short story that turns the reader into a transgressor, a spy, is, of course, a literary trick and an indication of Kanafani’s exceptional talent. In fact, I am convinced that, were this author’s short but prolific career allowed to run further, his luminous talent would have shone more brightly still.

He was born in Akka, Palestine, in 1936. By 1948 he and his family had to flee to Lebanon. In a short life – Kanafani died at the age of thirty-six – he wrote nearly twenty volumes of short stories, novels, essays, a study on Zionist literature and another on Palestinian literature under occupation. His work marks one of the most significant developments in modern Arab prose fiction. In 1967 he became a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a Marxist political movement. And in 1972, sixteen years after *Letter From Gaza*, Mossad, Israel’s national intelligence agency, without trial decided that Ghassan Kanafani was implicated in an attack on Lod Airport [Tel Aviv]. He was by then settled in Beirut with his wife, a Danish children’s rights campaigner, and their two children. Mossad installed a bomb in his car. Kanafani’s favourite niece, Lamis Najem, to whom he had dedicated his first book, was sitting beside him. Both died in the blast.

It is difficult not to see the assassination of Ghassan Kanafani as yet another attempt to obliterate the Palestinian narrative, to make true the claim, made by the Israeli politician Yigal Allon after 1967, that Palestinians no longer exist, for if they did they would have produced a literature. …

In Kanafani’s story we learn about the solitude of grief, of how slow and dark the initiation is. And here we come to how the augury

embedded in the text transcends the life and death of Ghassan Kanafani and Lamis Najem and even their assassin who could neither undermine nor console their grief, and points more poignantly perhaps to the life and incarceration of Gaza, the true protagonist of the story, which, back in 1956, when Kanafani had authored his story, was less amputated (a word that haunts the text) than the one Israel's latest assault has left behind.

LETTER FROM GAZA
—Ghassan Kanafani, 1956

Dear Mustafa,

I have now received your letter, in which you tell me that you've done everything necessary to enable me to stay with you in Sacramento. I've also received news that I have been accepted in the department of Civil Engineering in the University of California. I must thank you for everything, my friend. But it'll strike you as rather odd when I proclaim this news to you – and make no doubt about it, I feel no hesitation at all, in fact I am pretty well positive that I have never seen things so clearly as I do now. No, my friend, I have changed my mind. I won't follow you to 'the land where there is greenery, water and lovely faces' as you wrote. No, I'll stay here, and I won't ever leave.

I am really upset that our lives won't continue to follow the same course, Mustafa. For I can almost hear you reminding me of our vow to go on together, and of the way we used to shout: 'We'll get rich!' But there's nothing I can do, my friend. Yes, I still remember the day when I stood in the hall of Cairo airport, pressing your hand and staring at the frenzied motor. At that moment everything was rotating in time with the ear-splitting motor, and you stood in front of me, your round face silent. Your face hadn't changed from the way it used to be when you were growing up in the

Shuja'iyya quarter of Gaza, apart from those slight wrinkles. We grew up together, understanding each other completely and we promised to go on together till the end. But…

'There's a quarter of an hour left before the plane takes off. Don't look into space like that. Listen! You'll go to Kuwait next year, and you'll save enough from your salary to uproot you from Gaza and transplant you to California. We started off together and we must carry on…'

At that moment I was watching your rapidly moving lips. That was always your manner of speaking, without commas or full stops. But in an obscure way I felt that you were not completely happy with your flight. You couldn't give three good reasons for it. I too suffered from this wrench, but the clearest thought was: why don't we abandon this Gaza and flee? Why don't we? Your situation had begun to improve, however. The Ministry of Education in Kuwait had given you a contract though it hadn't given me one. In the trough of misery where I existed you sent me small sums of money. You wanted me to consider them as loans, because you feared that I would feel slighted. You knew my family circumstances in and out; you knew that my meagre salary in the UNRWA schools was inadequate to support my mother, my brother's widow and her four children.

'Listen carefully. Write to me every day… every hour… every minute! The plane's just leaving. Farewell! Or rather, till we meet again!'

Your cold lips brushed my cheek, you turned your face away from me towards the plane, and when you looked at me again I could see your tears.

Later the Ministry of Education in Kuwait gave me a contract. There's no need to repeat to you how my life there went in detail. I always wrote to you about everything. My life there had a gluey, vacuous quality as though I were a small oyster, lost in oppressive loneliness, slowly struggling with a future as dark as the beginning of the night, caught in a rotten routine, a spewed-out combat with time. Everything was hot and sticky. There was a slipperiness to my whole life, it was all a hankering for the end of the month.

In the middle of the year, that year, the Israelis bombarded the central district of Sabha and attacked Gaza, our Gaza, with bombs and flame-

throwers. That event might have made some change in my routine, but there was nothing for me to take much notice of; I was going to leave this Gaza behind me and go to California where I would live for myself, my own self which had suffered so long. I hated Gaza and its inhabitants. Everything in the amputated town reminded me of failed pictures painted in grey by a sick man. Yes, I would send my mother and my brother's widow and her children a meagre sum to help them to live, but I would liberate myself from this last tie too, there in green California, far from the reek of defeat which for seven years had filled my nostrils. The sympathy which bound me to my brother's children, their mother and mine would never be enough to justify my tragedy in taking this perpendicular dive. It mustn't drag me any further down than it already had. I must flee!

You know these feelings, Mustafa, because you've really experienced them. What is this ill-defined tie we had with Gaza which blunted our enthusiasm for flight? Why didn't we analyse the matter in such a way as to give it a clear meaning? Why didn't we leave this defeat with its wounds behind us and move on to a brighter future which would give us deeper consolation? Why? We didn't exactly know.

When I went on holiday in June and assembled all my possessions, longing for the sweet departure, the start towards those little things which give life a nice, bright meaning, I found Gaza just as I had known it, closed like the introverted lining of a rusted snail-shell thrown up by the waves on the sticky, sandy shore by the slaughterhouse. This Gaza was more cramped than the mind of a sleeper in the throes of a fearful nightmare, with its narrow streets which had their peculiar smell, the smell of defeat and poverty, its houses with their bulging balconies… this Gaza! But what are the obscure causes that draw a man to his family, his house, his memories, as a spring draws a small flock of mountain goats? I don't know. All I know is that I went to my mother in our house that morning. When I arrived my late brother's wife met me there and asked me, weeping, if I would do as her wounded daughter, Nadia, in Gaza hospital wished and visit her that evening. Do you know Nadia, my brother's beautiful thirteen-year-old daughter?

That evening I bought a pound of apples and set out for the hospital to visit Nadia. I knew that there was something about it that my mother and my sister-in-law were hiding from me, something which their tongues could not utter, something strange which I could not put my finger on. I loved Nadia from habit, the same habit that made me love all that generation which had been so brought up on defeat and displacement that it had come to think that a happy life was a kind of social deviation.

What happened at that moment? I don't know. I entered the white room very calm. Sick children have something of saintliness, and how much more so if the child is ill as result of cruel, painful wounds. Nadia was lying on her bed, her back propped up on a big pillow over which her hair was spread like a thick pelt. There was profound silence in her wide eyes and a tear always shining in the depths of her black pupils. Her face was calm and still but eloquent as the face of a tortured prophet might be. Nadia was still a child, but she seemed more than a child, much more, and older than a child, much older.

'Nadia!'

I've no idea whether I was the one who said it, or whether it was someone else behind me. But she raised her eyes to me and I felt them dissolve me like a piece of sugar that had fallen into a hot cup of tea. Together with her slight smile I heard her voice.

'Uncle! Have you just come from Kuwait?'

Her voice broke in her throat, and she raised herself with the help of her hands and stretched out her neck towards me. I patted her back and sat down near her.

'Nadia! I've brought you presents from Kuwait, lots of presents. I'll wait till you can leave your bed, completely well and healed, and you'll come to my house and I'll give them to you. I've bought you the red trousers you wrote and asked me for. Yes, I've bought them.'

It was a lie, born of the tense situation, but as I uttered it I felt that I was speaking the truth for the first time. Nadia trembled as though she had an electric shock and lowered her head in a terrible silence. I felt her tears wetting the back of my hand.

‘Say something, Nadia! Don’t you want the red trousers?’

She lifted her gaze to me and made as if to speak, but then she stopped, gritted her teeth and I heard her voice again, coming from far away.

‘Uncle!’

She stretched out her hand, lifted the white coverlet with her fingers and pointed to her leg, amputated from the top of the thigh.

My friend … Never shall I forget Nadia’s leg, amputated from the top of the thigh. No! Nor shall I forget the grief which had moulded her face and merged into its traits for ever. I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the colour of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this. The stones piled up at the beginning of the Shuja’iyya quarter where we lived had a meaning, and they seemed to have been put there for no other reason but to explain it. This Gaza in which we had lived and with whose good people we had spent seven years of defeat was something new. It seemed to me just a beginning. I don’t know why I thought it was just a beginning. I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge: more than that, it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg!

I went out into the streets of Gaza, streets filled with blinding sunlight. They told me that Nadia had lost her leg when she threw herself on top of her little brothers and sisters to protect them from the bombs and flames that had fastened their claws into the house. Nadia could have saved herself, she could have run away, rescued her leg. But she didn’t.

Why?

No, my friend, I won’t come to Sacramento, and I’ve no regrets. No, and nor will I finish what we began together in childhood. This obscure feeling that you had as you left Gaza, this small feeling must grow into a giant deep within you. It must expand, you must seek it in order to find yourself, here among the ugly debris of defeat.

I won’t come to you. But you, return to us! Come back, to learn from Nadia’s leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth.

Come back, my friend! We are all waiting for you.

Chris Whitman-Abdelkarim

THE KEEPER OF HERITAGE: SALIM AL-RAYYES

I first met Salim al-Rayyes in 2021. Not long before, I had noticed him mentioned in an article as the owner of a distinctive antiques shop in the heart of Gaza's Old City. One humid October afternoon during a work trip to Gaza, I followed the article's guidance on how to find the shop.

The Old City is the original part of Gaza. Much of what is considered Gaza's main neighbourhoods – al-Rimal, the port area, Tal al-Hawa – is less than a hundred years old, and mostly built to an ordered plan. The Old City, on the other hand, is filled with narrow, winding alleyways and some of the oldest buildings in Palestine. Whenever I visit, I enter through the Gold Market, which on sunny days can blind you with the glitter of Gazan gold and is invariably filled with couples selecting pieces for their wedding dowry. If you keep walking straight, you will hit the vegetable sellers and main spice market, offering blends unique to Gaza such as duggah and seasonings for freshly caught fish, as well as the world's finest maqdoos – pickled aubergines with a spiced walnut stuffing.

At the 1,400-year-old al-Omari Mosque I turned left, walked fifty metres, turned right and then spotted the shop, a nondescript shopfront with a chaotic display of old coins, decorative china plates, copperware and rusty trinkets of all kinds. The shopkeeper was sitting alone out front, sipping a glass of tea. 'Are you Salim?' I asked in Arabic. 'Of course I'm Salim!' he responded loudly in English. 'Who else would I be? Come in. Have a seat. Where are you from?'

A slight man in his early sixties, Salim al-Rayyes has been running his antiques business for decades. He is the keeper of Gaza's heritage. His shop, roughly three metres wide by nine metres deep, is crammed with shelves holding books and bric-à-brac from various parts of the world, tall cabinets filled with jewellery, Hebrew-English dictionaries, souvenir silver sphinxes, a large poster of former Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser…

I asked Salim what he had that was Palestinian, particularly historical items. 'Which time period or subject?' he replied. He went to the back of the shop, took a binder from one of his cabinets and said, 'Let's start here.' The binder was filled with historical documents, most in excellent condition, each neatly stored in its own plastic sleeve – British government papers, personal handwritten letters, birth certificates, even documents from Zionist political figures. 'I have maps, documents, photos, letters, land contracts, identity cards … anything you want,' said Salim.

He dumped two binders in my lap and hurried out of the shop. I opened one. Identity cards stared out at me, from the British Mandate period, the Egyptian occupation, the Israeli occupation, dozens of each. One of the Mandate-era cards had been owned by a man named Hasan, from Gaza. When Salim returned with coffee for us both, I asked if he knew anything about Hasan. Without pausing, Salim reeled off a long description, going into Hasan's place of residence, family background and occupation. Was Hasan a relative? 'No,' laughed Salim. 'I just know the story behind every piece.'

Then Salim, in what I later discovered was his usual manner, asked, 'Are you interested in a phone book?' He reached up and retrieved the *Palestine Phone Book 1929*, published by the British in Arabic. Each number was only four digits long and, at that time, there were only four phone lines in all of Gaza. Then came Salim's next question: 'What about Ottoman documents?'

Three hours later I emerged with a dozen items, including the phone book, a poster of King Farouk, Hasan's British, Egyptian and Israeli ID

cards and his Egyptian driving licence, Mandate-and Ottoman-era coins, a stamp collection and a family photo from 1915.

After a few weeks I was back. Salim, on cue, went to a cabinet and pulled out binders of nineteenth-and early twentieth-century photographs for me to look through. When I stopped at one particular image, he said: ‘Oh, I love this picture too. It’s from 1924. These are four friends. They grew up together but went their separate ways after graduating. They represent the changing times in Palestine. As you can see, one person is wearing a *tarboosh* [the local name for a fez] with a Western suit and a tie, another is bareheaded and wearing a suit but without a tie, and the other two are in variations of *fellaheen* [farmers’] wear. That time was a period of significant transition for us. There were new ideas and clothing styles, new opportunities for education, new leaders and regulations – and a growing colonial movement to address.’

Salim al-Rayyes (right) in his shop, with Chris Whitman-Abdelkarim, 2023.

As I continued to leaf through the photographs, Salim gave me deep and intimate stories about every one, highlighting what made it interesting or special.

That time I left the shop with a few more items – and an invitation from Salim to have dinner that night at his family's house. He picked me up at 8pm sharp outside my hotel with his son, Jameel. As we drove, Salim explained Gaza's different neighbourhoods, their history, purpose and demography. Ensconced shortly after in his living room in Tal al-Hawa, I noticed large, obviously old keys hanging on a nail. (Many Palestinian families display keys from property they were forced to abandon during the Nakba of 1948, and the key has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance to ethnic cleansing.) I asked Salim which village his family had come from. A little surprised, he explained that he is part of the twenty per cent of Palestinians in Gaza who are *muwatanin*, or 'nationals', meaning those who are indigenous to Gaza – as opposed to the eighty percent who are *laji'in*, refugees who arrived in Gaza post-1948. The keys, he said, belonged to his five-times-great-grandfather, who had owned extensive property in Gaza. He continued, with pride:

> Like other parts of Palestine, we in Gaza have our notable families: Husseini, Shawwa, Al-Rayyes, Ghouseini… We are an integral part of the fabric of Palestine. Take my family for example. We hosted Napoleon on his failed attempt to conquer Palestine in 1799. We were involved in the political movements at the end of the Ottoman period. We fought the British and the Zionists. We built a new Gaza after the Nakba. Separating the al-Rayyes' from the history of Gaza is like trying to tell the history of America without Washington or Jefferson. We are Gaza through and through. I have been working on the family tree, trying to map the al-Rayyes back as far as I can. Maybe one day I can talk my kids into writing a book on it. So far, I have been able to go back about fifteen generations, to the eighteenth century, but we were here long before that. I need more paper.

Over dinner I wondered how many customers Salim gets. ‘Foreigners? One or two a week, perhaps. They usually buy coins or stamps, basic things. Palestinians – half a dozen a day at most, and they generally want quotes on items they already own, rather than to buy anything.’

Then I asked the obvious question: why had Salim not considered opening a museum? He found the idea amusing.

> I have no interest in being a curator. We don’t get enough tourists here anyway, and it’s not worth it just sitting around watching people look at things and leave. I enjoy the business aspect. You know that anyone who makes it to Gaza will at least identify with our struggle. Therefore, you can be assured that your customers are good people with good intentions. Would I run the same type of business in Jerusalem? Probably not. But for Gaza, it works. I love seeing the joy in someone’s eyes when they get the opportunity to own and appreciate a piece of our history. They go back to their home countries and display fragments of Palestine. That counters the delegitimisation of our people. Also, in my experience, truly rare or unique pieces are only ever bought by true enthusiasts, whom I can trust to treat such items properly.

Some time later, before my next trip, I messaged Salim to let him know I was coming. He responded by bombarding me with fifty images of individual pieces and the message: ‘Let me know if you are interested in anything.’ As I scrolled, I noticed what appeared to be a uniform. I sent Salim a question mark. Ten minutes later I got back a long voice message explaining that it was an original Palestine Tax and Customs uniform, worn by a Gaza employee. He sent photos of the tag to show that the uniform was made in Palestine, and followed that with several photos of the man who used to wear it.

This started a regular trend: every week or so, Salim would send me photos of new acquisitions or items he thought I might like. Once, while we were sitting in his shop, I asked Salim how much inventory he actually has. He chuckled and said that the shop displays less than half, with the remainder divided between the shop's attic and storage at home. 'It all began with inheriting my extended family's possessions,' he said.

> When my grandfather and father passed away, no one else in the family showed much interest in their belongings, but I felt a strong connection to them. I wanted to preserve our family's history: we have been here for generations. Then I thought, if my family has these sorts of things, others must as well. So, I asked friends to see if they had any pieces they were interested in selling. The younger generations don't seem to care about this sort of thing, presumably because of the blockade and the constant struggle to provide for their families. Family documents from a hundred years ago are not considered a priority. So, I started by buying those.
>
> As the blockade worsened, people began to leave Gaza. But they could only take so much with them. People started approaching me with boxes of stuff they wanted to sell before departing. I am never leaving Gaza, so I was more than happy to become the caretaker of these treasures.
>
> And then there's real estate. It's common here for people to inherit houses from their recently deceased parents or grandparents, but most people aren't interested and prefer to sell. So I will sometimes purchase a small property that is already filled with precious objects. I fix up the house and sell it, and keep the antiques for my shop.

Salim would also acquire items in more unexpected ways. Once, in 2022, he showed me his range of Judaica, including many menorahs and Star of David necklaces – very unusual for downtown Gaza City. Up until 2000 or so, at the beginning of the Second Intifada, he said, he was in regular

contact with Israeli antiques sellers in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, and would sometimes come across pieces of Judaica in the boxes he would buy from them wholesale. Other examples, he said, were left behind by Israelis vacating Gaza's settlements after Israel's so-called disengagement in 2005. Standing holding a large decorated plate made for use during the Jewish festival of Passover, I couldn't imagine who, of Salim's customers, might buy such a piece, and wondered why he kept it, but he assured me he had interested customers.

I haven't seen Salim since the first week of October 2023. On that visit we had dinner at his family's home and he showed me the items he had been keeping for me: a fundraising letter sent in 1946 by Hajj Amin al-Husseini, former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem; *Palestine* magazine from the early 1960s, featuring the nationalist fighter Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini; and a petition from Gaza notables urging Palestinian businesses to boycott specific industries in Israel.

Three weeks later, after the Israeli bombing had begun, I finally got through to Salim again, and wept with relief. His usual boisterousness was gone. The family had been displaced to Deir al-Balah, with no access to electricity or water. 'We had to leave,' he told me.

> They bombed our house. Jameel was inside at the time. He is in al-Shifa Hospital, but should be OK. The house is gone, the neighbourhood is gone, Gaza is gone. I heard they bombed my shop. But we will rebuild. We always rebuild. Conquerors have destroyed Gaza ten times. My grandfather rebuilt after the British destroyed Gaza, and I and my children and my children's children will rebuild, too. By destroying my home and my shop, Israel has erased one hundred and fifty years of our

history, our presence and our stories in Gaza. They are trying to do to Gaza what they did to the rest of Palestine in 1948. Their goal is to eliminate us. Gaza is just the start. But they cannot erase Gaza; no one can. We will rebuild it.

Chris Whitman-Abdelkarim lives with his family in Kufr Aqab – nominally in Jerusalem but nearer Ramallah – and directs the regional office of the health organisation Medico International. He has worked for Palestinian and Israeli NGOs since 2011 on issues such as human rights, labour, settlements and the Jordan Valley, and travels frequently to Gaza. He contributed this story in April 2024, expanded from a version in Jerusalem Quarterly.

Editor's note: On 4 February 2024, journalist Omar El Qattaa visited Salim al-Rayyes's shop and reported for US National Public Radio that the building was in ruins, with 'old film negatives among the debris'.

Asmaa al-Ghoul

NEVER ASK ME ABOUT PEACE AGAIN

4 AUGUST 2014

Tears flowed until my body ran dry of them when I received a telephone call on Sunday 3 August informing me that my family had been targeted that morning by two F-16 missiles in the city of Rafah. Such was the fate of our family in a war that still continues, with every family in the Gaza Strip receiving its share of sorrow and pain.

My father's brother, Ismail al-Ghoul, sixty, was not a member of Hamas. His wife, Khadra, sixty-two, was not a militant of Hamas. Their sons, Wael, thirty-five, and Mohammed, thirty-two, were not combatants for Hamas. Their daughters, Hanadi, twenty-eight, and Asmaa, twenty-two, were not operatives for Hamas, nor were my cousin Wael's children, Ismail, eleven, Malak, five, and baby Mustafa, only twenty-four days old, members of Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or Fatah. Yet they all died in the Israeli shelling that targeted their home at 6.20am.

Their house was located in the Yibna neighbourhood of the Rafah refugee camp. It was one storey, with a roof made of thin asbestos, and it did not require two F-16 missiles to destroy it. Would someone please inform Israel that refugee camp houses can be destroyed, and their occupants killed, with only a small bomb, and that it needn't spend billions to blow them into oblivion?

If it is Hamas that you hate, let me tell you that the people you are killing have nothing to do with Hamas. They are women, children, men and senior citizens whose only concern was for the war to end so they can

return to their lives and daily routines. But let me assure you that you have now created thousands – no, millions – of Hamas loyalists, for we all become Hamas if Hamas, to you, is women, children and innocent families. If Hamas, in your eyes, is ordinary civilians and families, then I am Hamas, they are Hamas and we are all Hamas.

Throughout the war we thought that the worst had passed, that this was the pivotal moment when matters would improve, that they would stop there. Yet, that real moment of pain, of extreme fear, was always followed by something even worse.

Now I understood why the photographs of corpses were so important, not only for international public opinion, but for us, the families, in search of an opportunity to bid farewell to our loved ones, so treacherously killed. What were they doing in those last moments? What did they look like after their death?

I discovered the photos of my dead relatives on social networking sites. The bodies of my cousin's children were stored in an ice cream freezer. Rafah's Abu Yousef al-Najjar Hospital was closed after being shelled by Israeli tanks, and the Kuwaiti Hospital that we visited just a day earlier had become an alternate venue, where this freezer was the only option available.

Al-Najjar's director, Abdullah Shehadeh, told [me]: 'We decided to move the patients when shells hit the main gate. Some patients, out of fear, ran out, despite the gravity of the security situation. We are now working out of this ill-equipped hospital.'

The Emirati Maternity Hospital, west of Rafah, has been transformed into a large container for corpses, with fruit and vegetable freezers filled with dozens of bodies.

I saw corpses on the floor. Some had name-tags on their chests, while others remained unidentified. We held our noses, for the stench was unbearable. Flies filled the air. Ibrahim Hamad, twenty-seven, removed his five-year-old son's shroud-wrapped body from a vegetable freezer. Fighting back tears, he told [me]: 'He died as a result of a reconnaissance drone missile attack. His body has been here since yesterday. The dangerous situation prevented me from coming to take him any sooner.'

I thank God that my relatives were quickly buried, and that my cousins Mustafa, Malak and Ismail did not remain long in a freezer lest their corpses freeze. I thank God that their souls now rest in peace, leaving us with only the silence of death and bodies forever trapped in the postures of their passing.

On the fifth day of the war, when I went to write my Rafah report about the shelling of the Ghannam family, I stopped to visit my cousin's house. I saw my relatives and we took photographs together. During the war, my cousin Wael's wife had given birth to twins, Mustafa and Ibrahim – two tiny angels, harbingers of hope and joy. How could I have known that this would be our last meeting? I wish I had stayed longer and talked to them some more. Hanadi, Asmaa, my uncle and his wife laughed as they joked about the twist of fate that brought us together in the middle of a war, at a time when Israeli occupation forces had not yet begun perpetrating their wanton war crimes against Rafah.

Endings are so strange, as are living moments that suddenly become relegated to the past. We will never see them again, and the pictures that I took of the twins are now so precious, as one of them, Mustafa, was killed, while the other, Ibrahim, survived. I wonder how they could differentiate between them, for they looked so much alike. Who identified them, when their father was dead and their mother lay wounded in intensive care? Which was Mustafa and which Ibrahim? It was as if they had merged upon one twin's death.

In the photos taken after their death, my family looked so peaceful, with their eyes closed, as if asleep. None of them was disfigured or burned, unlike hundreds of dead children and civilians that US-made weapons had killed before them. We wondered if they died in pain. What happened when the missile, carrying tons of explosives, impacted their modest house and exploded, creating air pressure so fierce that their internal organs burst? Their suffering was perhaps lessened by the fact that they were sleeping.

I didn't see them when I went to Rafah the day before, on 2 August. I wrote about the death of the Ayad Abu Taha family, which was targeted by warplanes, and saw the corpse of one-year-old Rizk Abu Taha, when it

arrived at the Kuwaiti Hospital. I observed Rizk at length. He looked alive. One could see that he had been playing when he died, dressed in his pink trousers. How could he be at such peace? The bodies of war victims look so different from how they appear on television. They are so real, so substantial, suddenly there before you, without any newscast introductions, music or slogans.

Bodies lay everywhere, and it was as if everything in life had been to prepare us for this moment. Suddenly, the dead left their personal lives behind: their cell phones, homes, clothes, perfumes and daily chores. Most importantly, they left the fear of war behind.

The small Gaza Strip has grown larger, distances and time expanding as a result of the fear and death that shrank the life expectancy of the populace. We were unable to join the family for the funerals. My uncle, Ahmad al-Ghoul, later told me over the phone: 'Because of the inherent danger, our goodbyes to them lasted mere seconds. Malak's eyes laid open, as if to ask, "What wrong did I commit?"'

I was born in 1982, in that same house in Rafah's refugee camp where the family expanded. I grew up there, and everything else grew with us: the First Intifada, the resistance, my nearby school that I walked to every day. In that house I saw a library of books for the first time. In that house I remember watching my grandfather fall asleep as he listened to the BBC. And in that house I laid eyes on an Israeli soldier for the first time in my life, striking my grandfather to force him to erase the national slogans that adorned the walls.

Now, the house and its future memories have been laid to waste, its children taken to early graves, homes and recollections bombed into oblivion, their inhabitants homeless and lost, just as their camp always had been. Never ask me about peace again.

Journalist Asmaa al-Ghoul was born in Rafah in 1982. She won the Palestinian Youth Literature Award and, in 2012, a Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation. She advocates strongly for secular values and universal civil rights, opposing what she

has called ‘the corruption of Fatah and the terrorism of Hamas’. Her memoir A Rebel in Gaza *came out in 2018. She wrote this article for* Al-Monitor.

Refaat Alareer

DEATH IS NOT THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

18 MAY 2021

I am a storyteller first and foremost. Even in my teaching I tend to be a storyteller because this is what I learned as a Palestinian from my parents and grandparents – how to tell and retell story, to listen and encourage people.

I'm married, I have six kids – there's a lot of sibling rivalry, but we try to be as cool as possible because of the situation. Under Israel's brutal occupation and nonstop bombardment, there is a lot of despair, and parents carry a lot of responsibility: you don't want to die, of course, you want to live to take care of the kids, to see them through and to answer their questions. But we are privileged because we have not died, our homes have not been destroyed. We feel that guilt. Nobody in Gaza has remained untouched by this.

In 2014, Israel bombed our home of seven flats, and my brother who stayed behind was killed. A few days ago, my family had to evacuate, and my father insisted he's not going to leave, like parents here who think they can stop the Israeli missiles like Batman or Superman. My mum and siblings had to evacuate, and then hell broke loose. They hit over five hundred times, destroying everything, even the cemetery. My uncle was killed in the 1970s under Israeli police interrogation and the cemetery where he is buried was bombed, as if they killed him twice. We lost contact with my father – and it's 2014 all over again. You don't know what's

happening, you have no answers. Imagine, with the kids around you. Israel has made death an everyday reality.

I check the reports of bombings because of family, but I teach around a thousand Palestinians from Gaza every year and I also need to look out for them. One student, Zainab Al-Qolaq, – I taught her two courses – is an amazing, brilliant student, very active, very smart, full of life, promising, a good writer, a good translator. In two months she finishes her English degree, and she is now in a critical condition. She doesn't yet know she has lost seventeen family members.

That's what I mean, to be privileged in Gaza. Death is not the worst-case scenario.

If I must die

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze –
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself –
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die

let it bring hope
let it be a tale

Refaat Alareer (1979–2023) taught literature and creative writing at the Islamic University of Gaza, specialising in Shakespeare. He was active in many cultural initiatives and edited two volumes of short stories. He published ‘If I must die’ in 2011, and republished it on Twitter in November 2023, since when it has been translated into more than forty languages. He was killed in Gaza City by an Israeli airstrike on 6 December 2023, along with several members of his family.

Beesan Nateel

WHO AM I?

25 DECEMBER 2023

Who am I to think of surviving?

I’m not a bird, I’ve never held a cloud in my hand, and I don’t know how Santa Claus’s reindeer flies with a sleigh full of children’s gifts. Who am I to be welcomed into a normal life, with its ordinary sadness over a friend going away or grandparents dying? Where I plant basil on my windowsill, take care of my front doorstep and spill cups of tea without caring about water shortages? Where I cover my hands with engraved silver rings from Jerusalem, my greatest fear being I might mislay one of them among the drawers? I don’t think about food supplies as I know very well I’m not hungry, even though I haven’t had breakfast. I don’t care about the price of cheese, because it’s there in the market, and I don’t crave a piece of chocolate.

Who am I to escape this death?

I’m not rich enough to pay the five thousand dollars it costs to arrange a border crossing to Egypt. My grandfather didn’t know that his royal line would inherit a refugee’s life, so he spent his sadness between windows of hope that they would return to their land. He bequeathed me nothing but hope. Not even the window. All the windows of our city were shattered, Grandfather. The windows were assassinated.

And what memory will I carry after survival? To whom will I tell everything that’s happening now?

I’ll say we survived.

What survival is this?

And for what?

What life awaits me while I’m still ensnared in my home before displacement?

I want to return to my dresses hung up in the closet. To the chickens. I want the crepe myrtle, shedding its autumn on our doorstep. I want to embrace the palm tree in the courtyard, to play on the grandchildren’s swing. I want my mother, who used to welcome coffee cups with a new story each day, to come to life from beneath the ruins of our city.

For all this life that we left behind after our deaths, we deserve to survive.

Beesan Nateel is a writer from Gaza and author of the children’s book Luna al-Majnuna *(‘Crazy Luna’). This piece is sourced from* Passages Through Genocide.

Susan Abulhawa

HISTORY WILL NOT LIE

It’s 8pm in Gaza, Palestine, right now – the end of my fourth day in Rafah and the first moment I’ve had to sit in a quiet place to reflect. I’ve tried to take notes, photos, mental images, but this moment is too big for a notepad or my struggling memory. Nothing prepared me for what I would witness. What reaches the rest of the world is a fraction of what I’ve seen so far, which is only a fraction of this horror’s totality. Gaza is hell. What was once vibrant, colourful, full of beauty, potential and hope against all odds is draped in grey-coloured misery and grime.

Rafah is the southernmost part of Gaza, where Israel crammed 1.4 million people into a space the size of London’s Heathrow Airport. Water, food, electricity, fuel and supplies are scarce. Children are without school, their classrooms having been turned into makeshift shelters for tens of thousands of families. Nearly every inch of previously empty space is now occupied by a flimsy tent sheltering a family, with only small patches of grass here and there and an occasional tree waiting to be burned to bake bread for a family subsisting on UN rations of canned beans, canned meat and canned cheese.

It’s worse in the north.

People first resorted to eating horse and donkey feed, but that’s gone. Now they’re eating the donkeys and horses. Some are eating stray cats and dogs, which are themselves starving and sometimes feeding on human remains that litter streets where Israeli snipers picked off people who dared

to venture within sight of their scopes. The old and weak have already died of hunger and thirst.

Flour is scarce and more valuable than gold.

I brought in as much as I could, paying extra for six pieces of luggage and filling twelve more in Egypt. I had the foresight to bring five big bags of coffee, which turned out to be the most popular gift for my friends here. Making and serving coffee to the staff where I'm staying is my favourite thing to do, for the sheer joy each sip seems to bring. But that will soon run out too.

I hired a driver to deliver seven heavy suitcases of supplies to Nuseirat [Refugee Camp, north of Rafah], which he ferried down a few flights of stairs. He told me that carrying those bags made him feel human again because it was the first time in four months that he had been up and down stairs. It reminded him of living in a home instead of the tent where he now resides.

It is hard to breathe here, literally and metaphorically. An immovable haze of dust, decay and desperation coat the air. The destruction is so massive and persistent that the fine particles of pulverised life don't have time to settle. The lack of petrol made people resort to filling their cars with stearate – used cooking oil that burns dirty. It emits a peculiar foul smell and film that stick to the air, the hair, clothes, throat and lungs. It took me a while to figure out the source of that pervasive odour – but it's easy to discern others. The scarcity of running or clean water degrades the best of us. Everyone does their best with themselves and their children, but at some point, you stop caring. At some point, the indignity of filth is inescapable. At some point, you just wait for death, even as you also wait for a ceasefire.

But people don't know what they will do after a ceasefire. They've seen pictures of their neighbourhoods. When new images are posted from the northern region, people gather to try to figure out which neighbourhood it is, or whose house that mound of rubble used to be. Often those videos come from Israeli soldiers occupying or blowing up their homes.

I've spoken to many survivors pulled from the rubble of their homes. They recount what happened to them with a deadpan countenance, as if it

didn’t happen to them, as if it was someone else’s family buried alive, as if their own torn bodies belong to others. Psychologists say this is a defence mechanism, a kind of numbing of the mind for the sake of survival. The reckoning will come later – if they survive.

But how does one reckon with losing your entire family, watching and smelling their bodies disintegrate around you in the rubble, as you wait for rescue or death? How does one reckon with total erasure of your existence in the world – your home, family, friends, health, whole neighbourhood and country? No photos of your family, wedding, children, parents left; even the graves of your loved ones and ancestors bulldozed. All this while the most powerful forces and voices vilify and blame you for your wretched fate.

No one can think or hope for what might come after a ceasefire. The ceiling of their hope at this hour is for the bombing to stop. It is a minimal ask. A minimal recognition of Palestinian humanity. Despite Israel cutting power and internet, Palestinians have managed to livestream a picture of their own genocide to a world that allows it to continue.

But history will not lie. It will record that Israel perpetrated a holocaust in the twenty-first century.

Palestinians return to their homes amid the rubble after the Israeli Army’s withdrawal, Khan Yunis, May 2024.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian-American writer and activist. She is the author of three novels: Mornings in Jenin *(2010), which was translated into thirty-two languages,* The Blue Between Sky and Water *(2015) and* Against the Loveless World *(2020). She entered Gaza for a short period in February and March 2024. This is an edited version of her dispatch for* The Electronic Intifada.

Saba Timraz

MY HEART IS BROKEN

If you'd visited us in Gaza before 7 October 2023, you would have seen the whole of life: sea, sky, free birds, workers, students, children playing and everything that matters – family, memories, love. Since then, social media has been full of the events of the war and the systematic genocide that has left no person, no tree, no stone untouched.

A soldier from the obscene occupation army decides to wipe an entire family from history. Another piloting a warplane bombs them. Their house collapses in seconds. Body parts fly into neighbouring homes. Imagine a child, no more than seven years old, carrying pieces of meat in his school bag that were once the body of his brother, with whom he shared his day, his life, his memories, his happiness, his home.

And now there is no home, no family and no brother.

Gaza's two million displaced people are grief-stricken and heartbroken by the horror of what they have seen. We wait for the war to end, so we can wait again for whatever will happen next. We move from the unknown to the unknown, from pain to more pain, while the world watches, untroubled, offering only disapproving words.

Has life become this cheap? Where are human rights? Where is the United Nations? The Gaza war has exposed the lies and hypocrisy of the countries that drafted human rights legislation and international humanitarian law. They claim to be democratic yet are rotten with double standards.

My parents were outside the Gaza Strip before the war and could not get back in. It took 184 days for my father to be able to arrange for my younger sister and me to travel to Egypt. It cost him ten thousand dollars. That day we left our house at seven in the morning – I was in tears. At the Rafah crossing, it took six hours for us to pass through all the controls to reach the Egyptian side. After six more hours of waiting, to add to a lifetime of waiting, we began the bus journey to Cairo, arriving at 3am the next day, when we finally met our parents again amid a flood of emotion.

Thank God I left Gaza after 184 days of this brutal war. I left Gaza, but it did not leave me. Rather, my attachment to it and my love for it grew. And still, we wait for the unknown, while Gaza continues counting the days.

We now live in Egypt without residency, with no idea what the future holds. There are countless hurdles. I need to enrol at a university here to complete my studies. My sister, who was in the eleventh grade in Gaza, needs to restart school. It is not easy to lose everything and start your life again in another country. I am a displaced refugee. My heart is broken. I am dead, but trapped in life.

Has our life become a game, controlled by America and the occupier? They kill, destroy and do whatever they can to harm us, and then tell the world that they are the victims, and we are the monsters. We are an occupied people and have been since 1917. Our lands were stolen, our honour was violated, and the building blocks of our lives were destroyed. We want to be liberated and to live in freedom and dignity. We will not surrender our rights, no matter how long it takes.

Saba Mazen Timraz was born in 2004 and lives in Deir al-Balah. She graduated from high school in 2022, but her computer engineering degree course at Gaza's Islamic University was interrupted by war in October 2023. After six months under bombardment, she was able to leave in April 2024 for Egypt 'with broken dreams and an uncertain future'. She contributed this essay in May 2024.

Harun Hashim Rashid

PALESTINIAN

Palestinian.
Palestinian is my name.

In a clear script,
On all battlefields,
I have inscribed my name,
Eclipsing all other titles.
The letters of my name cling to me,
Live with me, nourish me,
Fill my soul with fire
And pulse through my veins.
Palestinian.

Poet Harun Hashim Rashid was born in Gaza in 1927. After working as a teacher, he became the Gaza director for Egypt's Sawt al-Arab radio station, later heading the PLO's media output in Gaza. Exiled after the war of 1967, he spent thirty years in Cairo as Palestine's permanent representative to the Arab League. His death in Canada in 2020 was marked by official notices of mourning from the Palestinian government. Rashid's poems express post-Nakba alienation and loss, often in rhyming, metred verse that lends itself to mass recitation: singers including Fairouz famously set them to music. Such characteristics, sadly, don't survive translation.

Such is my name, I know
It torments and grieves me,
Their eyes hunt me,

Pursue me, wound me.
For my name is Palestinian.
And as they pleased
They have made me wander.

I have lived all my life
Without traits and features
As they pleased,
They gave me names and titles.
Jails with their gates flung wide
Summon me
And in all the airports of the world
Are found my names and titles –
The lying wind carries me,
Disperses me.

Palestinian –
The name pursues me, lives with me.
Palestinian is my fate,
Clinging to me, reviving me.

Palestinian I am
Though they betray me and my cause;
Palestinian I am
Though they sell me in the market
For what they please,
For thousands of millions;
Palestinian I am,

Though to the gallows they drive me;
Palestinian I am,
Though to the walls they bind me.

Palestinian I am,
Palestinian I am,
Though to the flames they cast me.

I – what am I?
Without my name, Palestinian,
Without a homeland to live for,
To protect and be protected by?
I – what am I?
Answer me, answer me!

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Mahmoud Muna adds: I would like to acknowledge the endless support I have received from my parents, Majida Muna and Ahmad Muna. They survived the Nakba of 1948 and are witnesses to this ongoing genocide, yet their hope and belief in freedom remain unshakeable. Thanks go to my wife, Mai, and daughters, Laila, Lena and Salma, who tolerated my moodiness and my absence from family gatherings; I hope they will read this book to understand why someone could decide against his heart to spend time away from them. Thank you, too, to the team at the Educational Bookshop, who allowed me space and time to work on this project.

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